

屋久ユウキ

Yuki Yaku Presents

フライ

Illustration Fly



The Low Tier Character
"TOMOZAKI-kun", Level.1

Lv.1

Jaku-chara Tomozaki-kun

vol.1

by Yuuki Yaku

[Novel Updates](#)

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日南葵 (Hinami Aoi)

"Tomozaki-kun is, pretty strong in ATAFAMI, right?"



七海みなみ (Nanami Minami)

"Might this be a crisis for myself, Nanami Minami's, chastity!?"



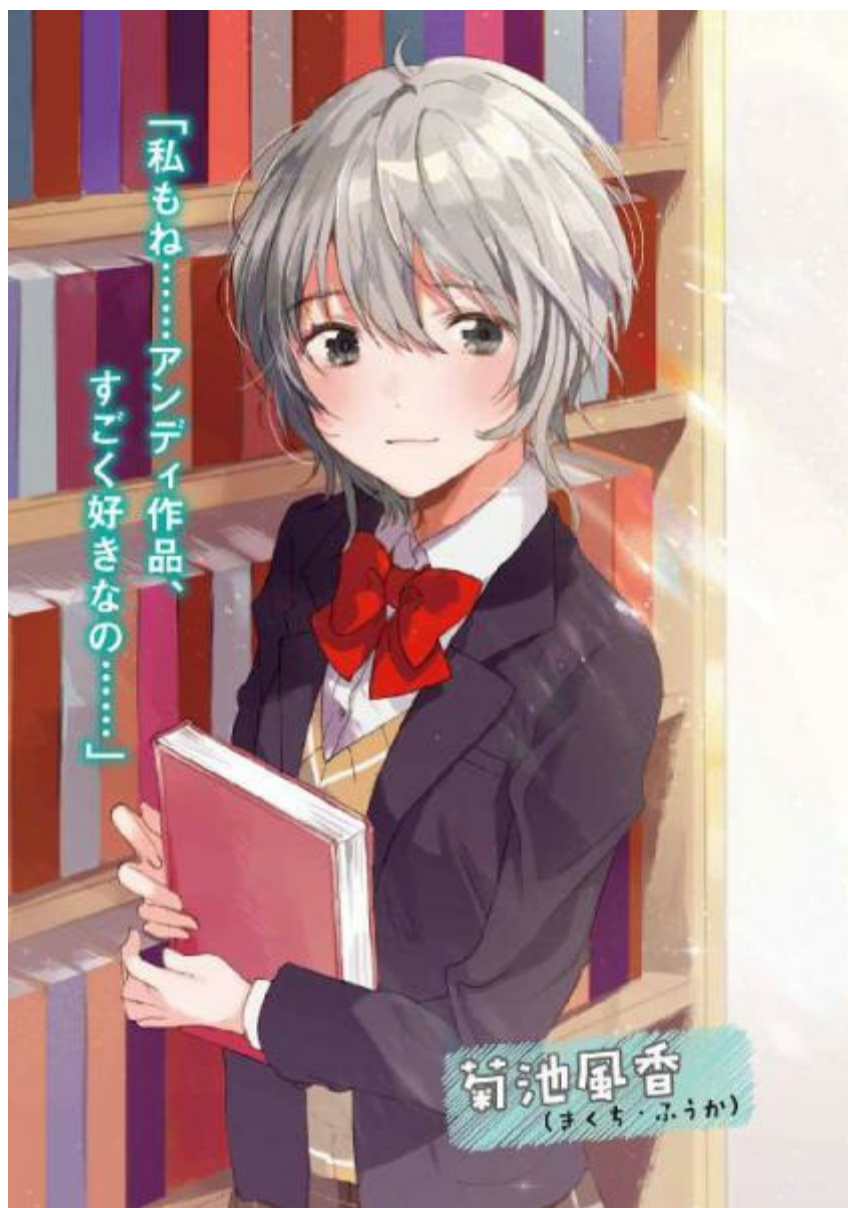
夏林花火 (Natsubayashi Hanabi)

"I don't need that kind of thing! Answer the question!"



泉優鈴 (Izumi Yuzu)

"You know, Tomozaki-kun, don't you seem to be getting along pretty well with Aoi lately?"



菊池風香 (Kikuchi Fuuka)

"I also.....really love Andy's works....."



↑Aoi's weak point≡ ←Sexual harassment !

Aoi≡Mimimi





(Character Introductions)

友崎文也 (**Tomozaki Fumiya**)

2nd Year High School Student. Jaku-chara.

日南葵 (**Hinami Aoi**)

2nd Year High School Student. Campus's Perfect Heroine.

七海みなみ (**Nanami Minami**)

2nd Year High School Student. Mood Maker.

夏林花火 (**Natsubayashi Hanabi**)

2nd Year High School Student. Tiny.

泉優鈴 (**Izumi Yuzu**)

2nd Year High School Student. Ike-group Girl.

菊池風香 (**Kikuchi Fuuka**)

2nd Year High School Student. Book Lover.

Chapter 0: If the opening is reviewed after clearing, it's a somewhat solemn experience.

copypaste

'Life is a kamige' – so goes the famous sentence, but if I were allowed to have my say, such a thing is a lie.

That exquisite balance adjustments have been carried out such that earnestly trying one's best will allow one to just about clear it, is a practical joke by human beings who have never been confronted with circumstances from which there are truly no ways out; that each character makes their appearance possessing deep humanity and history, is nothing but an ideal thought up by human beings unaware of the bottom-dwelling shallow mob characters that exist in society.

Please don't say something like, "Aren't you're a mob too".

After all, isn't operating with an infinite number of pixels x infinite number of pixels running at an infinite number of frames per second, not necessarily a good thing? There are times when having fewer pixels is tasteful, and above all else, it is *because* the resolution of this world is too high that the plain things like myself are plainly on display.

If it were pixel art, there's no mistaking that there would be much more similarity with everyone else.

I'm *not* crying.

I mean in the first place, the notion that it is desirable to have complicated intricacy to that degree, is a mistaken way of thinking to begin with. Assuredly, it is the case that superior games always have a simplistic beauty to them.

It's that way for shōgi ^[1], it's even that way for Super Mario, and even the rules for the latest FPS games are also simplistic in nature. Within simplistic rules and concepts, live profundity and flavour.

The games that have left their mark in history are always such.

Now then. On that point, how about Life.

From ancient times, many intelligent scientists have, by way of experiments and verification, been searching for the 'Rules of every phenomena' [2], that is, 'Life's Rules', but have in the end, up until the present day, yet to find the full answer.

From ancient times, many keen-minded philosophers have, with conceptions and logic, reflected on 'What is the meaning of life?', that is, 'Life's Concept', to the point of mental exhaustion but, I have not even once heard of an opinion that can provide a counter-argument when they say it depends on the person.

That kind of game where, it is anything *but* simple to provide a good answer when forced to explain the rules and concepts, except by way of 'For the time being just live, I don't really know what's next', just where is the so-called kamige?

On the contrary, even when doing the same as others, people will be discriminated via factors such as face, physique, or age, with their sub-par characteristics picked out and the like, such that regardless of how hard they might try to overcome those physical appearances, all would be for naught.

As reasoning for kusoge status, only persuasive elements are noticeable.

Innocent Jaku-charas like myself, are persecuted simply for being weak by nature.

Unreasonably unequal. Disadvantageous to the weak.

In other words — 'Life is a kusoge'.

This commonplace stereotyped phrase is the reality of this world.

Saying such, one might hear the following objection. "*Isn't it because you aren't properly trying your hardest at Life that you think that way?*".

However, that would be the one-sided thinking of those who have been kyou-charas from birth. Since they started off in an advantageous position, they fail to notice the irrationality of 'Life'. As they make use of the easy mode of a kyou-chara for peerlessness, they find it enjoyable and, regrettably, assume that the same applies to the rest of the world.

To sum up, that is just a niwaka-gamer's opinion. [3]

If you haven't played very many games to the end, just leave already.

A niwaka-gamer who is only enjoying themselves because they just so happened to be born a kyou-chara, is not qualified to talk about Life.

The consistently persevering in every game, reaching and continuously standing at the top me is the one talking here, therefore there can be no doubt.

Life is, a kusoge.

—End. Japan's number one gamer, «nanashi».

Translator Notes

[1] **Shōgi**: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shogi> Basically Japanese chess. While we're on the topic, I recommend reading Ryuuou no Oshigoto!

[2] あらゆる事象の法則. Conceptually, my first thought was that it would be the “Theory of Everything”, but that's 万物の理論. If I ever find a better translation I'll edit it in.

[3] **Niwaka-gamer**: I asked a native speaker about this, and from my understanding, it means you're one of those people who only play a game because it gained a sudden surge in popularity, and will quickly stop playing it once the popularity dies out. So, not one of those experienced oldies who have been playing it quietly since the beginning. This was difficult to translate in an easily understood manner (bandwagon-gamers? I don't know), so I left the term as it was.

Chapter 1: No matter what they say, the famous games are generally interesting

PART 1

The difference in ability was plain to see.

From my presently controlled ninja character 'Found''s movements and, Nakamura's fox-character 'Foxy''s movements, anyone watching would be able to tell that a level gap existed. Well, for a riajuu ^[1], he wasn't actually at all that bad. It had been rumoured that he was using this video game — «ATAFAMI» to continuously win bet after bet, but now, the extent of truth to those claims was being revealed. I had, as soon as the match started, been certain of victory.

However, I was, with regards to ATAFAMI, not the type to hold back. That's why, even in this situation where Nakamura's remaining lives had already reached 1, I deliberately made a show out of straight up plunging in recklessly, while jolting in a way that indicated I was about to use 'Blink'^[2] mid-charge. Likely, if it's the case that his true strength only amounted to this much, he probably wouldn't even know what 'Blink' was. Barely touching the ground by applying 'Midair Evasive Movement' diagonally downwards, a quick, surface-skimming evasion technique.

Nakamura, discomforted by the jolting, fired a blow. I let the shot pass behind me, using 'Blink' to dodge, then took advantage of the opening and drew close. The fundamental of this game's combos was throwing. After throwing an opponent to the ground, for how long would an activated combo be able to connect? The character I was using, Found, was especially powerful in that aspect.

Nakamura's character was now held in place by Found. From here on out the fight proceeded into my unrivalled sphere of activity. Though I phrased that rather simply, in *truth* this required the use of combos that each demanded delicate operation, strung together in rapid succession. It wasn't that methods

of escaping did not exist, but that Nakamura, did not know how, *did not have the ability* to do so. Therefore, this situation as it was, naturally meant the end.

With that, Nakamura's lives were zero—。

"Yosh" [3]

Yep. *Whoops*, I just went and won it. Well, for me to lose in ATAFAMI to an amateur was an impossibility, but for it to have been carried out with such ease was what brought about the problematic feeling. How should I put it, I was scared of what was to come.

Each player starting with four lives. An even stage devoid of gimmicks. Seeing each other's play for the first time.

Under those impartial conditions, Nakamura's remaining lives totalled zero. My remaining lives — four.

That would be, well, a complete victory. I tried looking in Nakamura's direction, and found him examining the controller I held in my hands for comparison, with an expression of wanting to say something. This was somewhat surprising. Who would have known that during my high school life, from *Nakamura* I would have this kind of weak gaze directed at me. I had never imagined it.

A brown-haired ikemen [4], riajuu from a glance, even when it came to studies, sports, and popularity with the girls; the only thing missing was gaming skills, or else all aspects would be of the highest tier. With just his good qualities, already head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd, countenance overflowing with confidence, the riajuu high school student, Nakamura.

That same Nakamura was, looking at me with weak eyes. At the likes of someone like me who, from one look, would be exposed as a kimo-ota [5].

"...the... ault."

Nakamura was saying something.

"Eh?"

"It's the character's fault"

"...What?"

"The character was inferior. Because of that, this kind of thing is normal."

"N-No, that character and this character, in terms of ability they're about the same, though..."

"Not *that*, I meant in terms of *compatibility*. No matter how you think about it, isn't the compatibility bad here?"

Nakamura spoke matter of factly. I was completely taken aback. That kind of, no-matter-how-you-think-about-it excuse.

Then with a, *ahh I get it now*, I realized. The reason for this kind of useless resistance, was the matter of how much he had immensely underestimated me. If he didn't do this much, he'd be unable to hold on to any of his pride after suffering such a humiliating defeat by me, so — *since it's this person it's acceptable to make such a lame excuse* — even *that* consideration existed. Since I possessed the prerequisite of being looked down upon. That's right, this was an unfair provision bestowed upon jaku-charas.

However. Only now was different.

This moment. Only at this moment where Atafami was being played before my eyes.

"Cer-Certainly, Foxy falls fast, making combo connection very, very easy."

"As I said. Then it was down to the characters' compatibility, that game."

I breathed in, then looked straight into Nakamura's eyes. Scary. But.

"...That sort of thing, don't you agree that it's an excuse?"

I had gotten used to being looked down on. There weren't any particular feelings of frustration. Such a thing had become natural, after all.

"No, wasn't it actually like that? You're seriously happy about winning with that thing? It's a kusoge, isn't it. Pointless."

However, to something like this, I was completely unaccustomed.

To me— the defeated persons, who without any exertion, used such justification, were an existence I disliked above all else.

"You bet I'm happy. That you think it's pointless, isn't it because you didn't win? You didn't taste the sensation of winning, and so don't actually comprehend anything, right? The one who has won and after winning, even so calls the game pointless, *that* I can understand. However, for the guy who lost to, even after losing, say that kind of thing, it's just the whining of a loser."

I, using the conviction of myself being on the ATAFAMI battlefield, spoke sharply.

"Ha? It's really just the character's affinity isn't it. It's a kusoge, *a kusoge*. Wins and losses don't *exist*."

"Like I said, it's not a difference that was down to compatibility. The reason you lost is that you are weak. Even with our characters switched, I would have won."

"Then, should we do it? Character exchange. In that case, I definitely would *not* lose to someone like you."

With eyes fired up with fighting spirit, Nakamura said as such. To be able to declare at this timing something like he'd never lose, something like courage, or should I say, thick headedness, or should I say, something like groundless self-confidence, is really a unique characteristic belonging to one of Life's kyou-charas. As for me, as for a Life's jaku-chara, this is nonexistent. Despite being mistaken, the power to behave as if in the right. Possessing self confidence on the basis of 'It's me after all'. I did not possess the strength of such a living being.

Far removed from that, I had won this many flawless victories, but for some reason still felt slightly uneasy.

However, in the present moment I was nothing like a jaku-chara.

"...Err, but it's kinda bothersome, so."

"What's up with that? If you're going that far, we're *definitely* doing another."

"...NOT, afterwards if there's yet another worthless excuse, it'll be troublesome."

"Ha?"

The me that is in the middle of playing ATAFAMI, is the strongest.

"Certainly there's the, *let's switch characters*, afterwards it'll be, *let's also switch controllers*. Then something like, *the buttons aren't functioning properly, that's why I was sluggish*. Next could be, *why don't we change our seating positions? The screen glare was~* or reaching something to that effect. Then, *let's change the settings to eight lives. If it's a drawn out contest, wouldn't our true strength clearly come out?*

Then, I wonder what next. Maybe, if you don't know how to get out of it, then something like *let's not use inescapable combos? That's not an issue of technique, it's a matter of game knowledge after all. If we do so then it will be a battle of purely operating technique, reflexes, and judgement right?* Uhhh, seems like there's probably more? ...*Shall we change clothes or something too?*"

Ha ha ha. Now I've said it, now I've gone and said it. There'll definitely be regret later. For me.

"...Don't *need* those excuses. Don't get carried away. Seriously."

Incredible, how I'm being glared at this intensively by those eyes. Glared at this intensively, I'm instinctively made to think that compared to him, I'm nothing more than a lowly animal, and the inferiority complex comes surging out. A given that I should apologize. Even though in this situation, no matter how you think about it, I'm the one in the right. These are the rules that have been established in Life.

Nakamura and I changed the stage, changed controllers, changed characters, configured the settings to eight lives, and as expected, *without* changing clothes, all that was left now was to press the start button, and the battle would commence.

"If I win, properly accept it, Nakamura."

"I get it."

"You really don't, you know."

"...No, like I said, I get it already. I'll properly recognize your true strength."

"No, of course that's a given, but. After that, there's one extra thing you need to recognize."

"What *now*?"

This guy, seriously doesn't know a thing.

"Earlier, you called ATAFAMI a kusoge, right?"

"Ha?"

The truth is, rather than the matter of him refusing to accept his defeat, it was *this* that I had been taking offence at.

"...That ATAFAMI is a kamige, recognize it."

Naturally, in that bout, I ended up winning eight lives to none, a complete victory.

Translator Notes

リア充

[1] **riajuu**: Likely you've seen/heard this term used in other Japanese media. It's an internet slang originating from 2chan, directed towards a person who in 'real' (-> リア ria) life seems to be living it to perfection (充 実 juujitsu). Basically they seem to have everything going their way. That's my interpretation, anyway.

[2] 瞬, with furigana しゅん. Possibly from 瞬間 (instant)? No idea, I'll just call it Blink for now, since for some reason the alternatives (Wink, Twinkle ☆≡) just don't seem to fit! Think SC2 Stalker Blink.

[3] **yoshi** (よし): Honestly can't think of a fitting English translation. You should read it as "Yosh" here, I think. I associate "Yoshi" with "Yoshi yoshi" *comforts little kid*

[4] **ikemen** (イケメン): The nuance is pretty much "Handsome guy".

[5] **kimo-ota**: A portmanteau of the words kimoi (disgusting, gross) and otaku (you probably know the gist of this second word already, but note that while you *might* be throwing this term around proudly, in Japan this tends to have

negative connotations).

PART 2

«nanashi»: Good game

«コウキ»: Good game ^[1]

Thus, the next day, as per usual, I was fighting online battles in AttackFamirizu ^[2] — colloquially known as «ATAFAMI». Since opponents have the ability to chat with each other, it was part of gaming etiquette to exchange such formalities at the end.

Naturally, this time had also been my victory. Steadily, increasing my rating ^[3]. After the ratings had been reset four months ago, in a number of weeks I had ascended to the rank of number one in Japan, and even now I was safely maintaining that position. My online handle was «nanashi». The reasoning behind it might be embarrassing, but I had gone with ^{nanashi}名無し (nameless ^[4]) purely on the basis of it looking cool. Tomozaki Fumiya, my real name, had absolutely no relation to it.

Before the ratings had been reset, I guess there had been a few instances where I had fallen into a slump, but nevertheless for the most part I had consistently maintained my number one rank. It was probably safe to say that, at least domestically, there were no contenders.

ATAFAMI, due to its seldom seen degree of perfection, currently held the highest gamer population in the current competitive online gaming world. In other words, being number one in this game meant that, saying I was the most skillful gamer in Japan would be a justified statement. *Probably*.

As for my tag «nanashi», regarding that, there existed another ATAFAMI player with the one of a kind naming sense, «NO NAME». While not to the extent of snatching away my number one status, for these past few months they had continuously attached themselves to the number two spot in the rankings. Moreover, as far as I could tell, ever since attaining the second place rank, NO NAME was also such that they had never given up that position. In

other words, 'nanashi' and 'NO NAME' currently held a monopoly over first and second place.

Since there was also similarity in the name, within the Internet gaming community, there existed a "*Could it be that those two accounts are the same person?*" rumour that was making the rounds with plausibility.

Therefore the I of nanashi will declare. «nanashi» and «NO NAME» are, completely different people. However, in the ATAFAMI world, the matter of how NO NAME had suddenly turned up during the past few months, the matter of the improbable speed with which they had ascended all the way up to second place, and then more than anything else, the matter how nanashi and NO NAME directly confronting each other was an event that had yet to materialize, all these points lent themselves to the authenticity of the theory that they were one and the same. At any rate, since their character of choice was the same «Found», there were even similarities in playstyle. Most likely, it would seem that they had used the archives of my battle recordings for reference.

«**nanashi**»: Good game

«**YuKichi**»: Good game. You're incredibly strong, aren't you?

«**nanashi**»: Thank you. Then.

Thus with yet another victory, I left the room. Well, even I had suffered defeats before but, recently, those had become more down to the issue of an internal battle with myself. An incident where I had lost to my opponent in terms of technique execution, first of all did not exist; all those times where I had lost had been down to my own mistakes. However for this reason, even now when I held first place, effort was still worth putting in, for it could be said that there still remained some room for improvement.

With that reason in mind, while thinking about things such as reducing my mistakes made in the next fight —

I caught my breath.

In the opponent column, a single name was displayed. [5]

«**NO NAME**» Rating: 2561

I could feel the blood in my body beginning to rush to my head. My prior thoughts had been, that NO NAME was simply imitating my playstyle. However, their actions taken immediately following the commencement of the match proved completely different.

I charged my opponent, with the aim of executing a combo. However, NO NAME simply stayed in place on alert, starting to accumulate firearms.

This was, in times where it had become a Found mirror match, the only action that I considered disadvantageous to me.

Thus, this was no coincidence. I evaluated the situation without even considering that possibility.

They had performed their research on me, but rather than it being a simple blind imitation, they had even gone so far as constructing countermeasures for my individual style. For some reason, this was something I held confidence in.

What was even more astonishing was, things like NO NAME's unmatched accuracy, and the overwhelming skill with which they were able to escape from combos. If I let up just a little in my operation, they would immediately escape from the combo. Things like their movement around the stage and conception of a situation from which to start a combo still had a ways to go before reaching my level, but if it was their combo escaping technique we were talking about, then in all honesty — they had already surpassed me.

Rather than that, perhaps it's just that my combo escaping technique was currently too poor. As for why, I was too strong, so in the first place, instances when I had been caught by a combo were scarce. In other words, this was one of my very few weak points.

To sum up, 'Not receiving an attack from the onset is good, therefore it is only the skill of escaping combos that is unnecessary'.

Such a consideration, such a premise. For this reason, supposing an occasion where NO NAME possessed approximately the same level of movement or combo conception as I, the difference in skill at escaping combos would probably bring about my loss.

— and it is likely that, NO NAME had such things included in their outlook.

As for why I knew that. It was simple.

NO NAME was, in comparison to their level, way too skilful at escaping combos.

At that level, it becomes uncommon to be caught in a combo by an opponent; in other words, the number of chances to practice escaping combos steadily diminishes. That's why, without being limited to NO NAME, within the super top rankers, myself included, the kind of players who were strong at attack but poor in defensive battles were numerous.

However, this NO NAME. Considering their second place ranking in Japan, they had way too much experience in defensive battles. No, rather than that, that was probably their specialty.

This implied, that NO NAME had numerous opportunities to be struck by combos — no, if I had to say it fully, 'Regularly, for the sake of practice, was deliberately letting combos connect', that was the kind of meaning this carried.

In other words NO NAME was, throwing aside immediate gratification such as their win percentage or exhilaration from playing.

With their terminal strength, their ranking in the long term in view, they fought. Even if as a result their circumstances were to become unfavourable in their immediate battles, even if their winning percentage decreased, even if their ranking or reputation were to fall, instead opting for the results several months later.

People who might call such a person a namepu^[6] would be wrong, for this was fully-fledged training.

At the very least, I was unaware of any other player who had abandoned all immediate pleasures without exception, and then produced clear 'Results'.

NO NAME. I'd had the intention of staying the number one rank in Japan forever, but perhaps there was no longer any allowance to declare as such. This much could be said, however. In the present state of affairs, within Japan, if there ever were to materialize an ATAFAMI player that surpassed me, then.

It would likely be NO NAME, only a single person.

As I reflected on that, the outcome was decided — a manifestation of the present difference in abilities, I was victorious with two lives remaining.

«**nanashi**»: Good game.

Then, the final courtesies. The acknowledgements in the chat. As soon as I received the response from my opponent, I would leave the room.

«**NO NAME**»: Do you live in Kantō? [7]

Hn? Asking where I live. I wonder what the intention might be.

«**nanashi**»: Yes, it is Kantō...

«**NO NAME**»: If you feel so inclined, would you like to meet up?

«**nanashi**»: Eh, by that, do you mean one-to-one in real life?

«**NO NAME**»: Yes, precisely that. If possible, I'd like to have a talk, and revenge match.

An invitation to an offline meeting. In addition to that, likely one-on-one. Just what might it mean?

What's the deal here. Certainly, recently the hurdle of meeting someone you had met online had been lowering, and in actuality, thinking about it normally, it wasn't even that dangerous of a thing. In this way, considering the connection between the first and second rated in ATAFAMI, meeting them would probably make for an interesting experience. With that being the case...

«**nanashi**»: Understood, I'm ok with that.

«**NO NAME**»: Thank you! Your nearest station, which might it be? I'm the one who invited you, so I'll make my way from here.

«**nanashi**»: Ehh, let me see...

I designated a station, and we arranged for a meeting place and time. Rather than the station closest to me, I chose the terminal station one stop away from my house. This way would probably provide the other party with a more convenient commute.

«**NO NAME**»: Understood! Then, next Saturday, at 14:00. I look forward to meeting you!

In this way, right after the long awaited showdown, with such offhand acceptance, a face to face offline meeting ^[8] with NO NAME had been arranged.

Translator Notes:

[1] They actually say お疲れ様でした here, but in this context it carries the same meaning as Good game. Japanese gamers may shorten it to simply おつ, which I suppose is the equivalent of gg.

...I guess I should also mention his opponent's username is kouki. It's not that important though, you can forget this random scrub.

[2] Look, I decided I'd rather not go with the literal translation of アタックファミリーズ here because well, I thought it was too easy to read that one the wrong way. So I went with this more subtle stylization. Just a personal choice, though I could decide to change this in the future. If you can't read katakana, don't mind me and continue as you were.

[3] The rating here refers to a number as in elo rating for chess. The higher the number, the higher up you are in the world rankings.

[4] 名na 無しnashi: Broken up, literally means namewithout.

[5] He's probably placed in some sort of matchmaking queue after each game finishes.

[6] Literally from 舐め^{name}・る^{ru} (to make fun of) and pu from プレイヤー^{player}. I suppose it means you're so confident about beating your opponent, you find ways to bad manner them during the game. DO NOT pronounce it the English way as in "my name: ru". For the correct pronunciation just pop it in google translate.

[7] Kantō: A geographical region of Honshu, that big island of Japan that's between the others. Coincidentally (not really), also the name of the first region in the Pokémon world, located east of Johto.

[8] Original: サシオフ, which probably comes from 差し(face to face) and offline meeting.

PART 3

A face-off against Nakamura on Saturday, and against NO NAME on Sunday. The Year 2 Class 2 classroom for the first time after those two days was, contrary to my expectations, fairly normal. *Depending on Nakamura's arrangements, considerable deterioration of my social status would not be unusual* – is what I had resolved myself for, but after actually attending school, I was relieved by the lack of interest.

The revelation that Nakamura, who had the reputation of being formerly strongest in middle school, also strongest in high school, and myself, who had the reputation of 'For some reason, he seems very strong' would finally be having a showdown. While not to the extent of making headlines, that story had still carried the sensation of being the kind of incident that would only spread through the classroom once every two or three weeks. In comparison to then, during the now after the confrontation, nobody was even approaching the subject, probably meaning that everyone had vaguely guessed the outcome and decided it was best to avoid touching on the subject ^[1]. Well, something like that was the number one peaceful resolution.

Just like that, I continued as always with my days of solitude, the time I spent not being very exciting, but at the same time not particularly dissatisfying. One *could* say that I was enjoying my lukewarm everyday life. I accepted such an everyday, continuing to live on.

— In the middle of all this, when a small incident took place was during Wednesday's lunch break.

Appropriately, at that time I was walking through the corridor on my own, on the way to eat a meal or such. I had just so happened to come across Nakamura. Had this been under the same conditions as usual, then simply ignoring each other would have been acceptable but, this time, an irregularity had sprung forth. Nakamura was leading a girl. On top of that, it was Hinami Aoi.

Hinami Aoi. A yamatonadeshiko ^[2] gifted with both intelligence and beauty, with her innocence, liked by males and females alike, an undisputed perfect heroine. That she was first in the school for academics was natural, but she was even a cut above the rest in all manners of tests for physical fitness — short distance sprints and handball games to name a few — making her ranked first amongst the girls. No, to say nothing of the girls, she could even make for fierce competition ^[3] with the boys' top athletes; it was exactly that kind of cheat specification. Despite all this, as part of her natural makeup, she sported a sociable smile devoid of disagreeableness. Notwithstanding that, she possessed, in some respects, an impossible to hate spontaneity, or should I say frankness, or otherwise ridiculous elements, but those weak points only served to perfect her even further as a woman, even leaving a sense of glamor drifting in the air, to the point that the construction was already beyond understanding.

Even the bad with riajuus me had a favourable impression, or rather, was already at the level of having completely embraced the feelings of awe.

Why she came to this Sekitomo High School was pretty much a complete mystery. Within Saitama prefecture, top private schools do exist but, at the end of the day, when compared to prep schools in the metropolitan area, they'd be no more than average in the rankings. I mean, there *are* an excessive number of surrounding rice fields. Talking about Saitama, if one were to move far away from the train station, rural areas would be numerous, right.

Previously, the two — well, *ike* but not really *ike*, though when compared with me could decisively be called *ike* ^[4] — classmates seated behind me had discussed the matter, and I recall their conversation going something like this.

"Say, about Aoi-chan, what do you think of her?"

"Aoi-chan, meaning, Hinami Aoi?"

"That's right."

"My thoughts..... I super love her. Everyone's the same, don't you agree? She's an idol, so isn't that already a given?"

"Totally."

"It should be abnormal in itself, right. Studies, sports, figure, perfect in just

about anything and everything. Isn't that at the same level as being a genius?"

"Soo true. For us, no matter how hard we were to try in whatever part of whatever genre, against her it wouldn't feel winnable..."

"Despite all this, she has an extremely good relationship with everyone, doesn't she. That part's so weird. After all, if I were asked by anyone which girl I'm on the best terms with, it'd definitely be Hinami Aoi."

".....Me too. That girl's the one I have the best relationship with"

"Right? It's so weird. There isn't even very much merit to being on good terms with us. Yet, she doesn't discriminate. So, it's not a calculated thing, that."

"Just what is with that, I wonder if it's okay to do something like call her a prodigy at life too..."

"Aaa, that's exactly the right feeling. A baseball prodigy, or inventive genius, titles like those aren't quite right, but rather than those, a prodigy at life. A deity."

"For our school to be blessed by her admission, it kind of makes you want to express gratitude to Aoi-chan's parents doesn't it."

"So true. Like, the only victory Saitama has over Tokyo, it's Hinami Aoi's existence."

—That Hinami Aoi, far from even being on bad terms with, I had never even spoken once with, just how was this possible...? On the contrary, might she possibly be some kind of genius, is what I had been made to think. Also don't talk about Tokyo Tokyo, first of all we should defeat Kanagawa, I had also thought. Otherwise, Chiba. We can't be defeated.

At any rate, that Hinami Aoi was together with Nakamura. Naturally, for the news of the face-off between Nakamura and I to have not reached her was highly unlikely. And so, a small explosion took place.

"Ah! Tomozaki-kun! I heard you had a match with Shuuji ^[5] in Atafami? How did it go?"

"Eh, ahh Hinami-san, err, about that, kaba—" ^[6]

Completely bit my tongue. However, this wasn't a matter of me biting my tongue because I was a kimo-ota, but rather, probably one of *Hinami Aoi* being the other party, expectedly making it easy for me bite my tongue like a kimo-ota.

"Ahaha, what's with that, *kaba*?"

Completely being *laughed* at, yet for some reason *without* the feeling of being made fun of. I wonder if it's the innocence seeping out from that smile that makes that happen. Or else, perhaps the laughter's pure timbre. Or else, perhaps the elegant way in which she held her hand over her mouth. To be able to see Hinami Aoi-san in a joyous state, only pleasant feelings rose up. I wonder what this is. As for this smile, it involves magic.

"Ahahaha, ahh, fun. Err, what was it. Ah, that's right! Which side won?"

Fun? Fun. That I had been able to *amuse* Aoi Hinami-san, something as wonderful as this, I wonder, does it exist? Even the impression of a saint-like existence. The heck is this.

"Uhh..."

"Un un" [7]

However, Nakamura was in the immediate vicinity. It was evident that the sight of me had put him in a bad mood. At the time of the showdown, being caught up in the heat of moment, in the end I had continuously barraged him with all those words, so *that* was inevitable.

The problem was, under these tense circumstances, not to mention being in front the campus's heroine, there was the issue of, were I to say something like "I'm the one who won", just what would happen? Nakamura would likely want to be thought well of by Aoi Hinami, and for my stock to rise was something, I, from the bottom of my heart, would probably not be pleased about... yep, seems like it's about to become an unpleasant matter.

No, well, even I possessed feelings of wanting to show off my cool side *just* a little in front of the campus's heroine. I might be twisted but I too am human. However for *me* to show off that kind of slightly cool side, it would in no way be relevant hereafter; on the contrary, the possibility that I'd be thought of as an

exceedingly strong otaku-kimoi-warota ^[8] existed. As for why, it's because Life is an unfair kusoge. With that being the case, saying here something like I lost might be the better way to go. If I did so, then as a result everything would *probably* work out peacefully. No, but on the contrary, that *might* injure Nakamura's pride..... After thinking this far, I suddenly came to a realization.



Wait a minute. This perfect superwoman Hinami Aoi, why was she asking *me*?

They were on good terms, so no matter how you think about it, asking *Nakamura* would be natural. Could it be the considerate *let's have a conversation with Tomozaki-kun, with whom I hardly ever talk?* No, to begin with, given Hinami Aoi's skill at reading the mood, from the recent atmosphere at school, she *should* have come to more or less realize that Nakamura had lost. Under these circumstances, bringing up the subject with me was unusual. If that's the case, I wonder what this state of affairs is.

...I don't understand. As I thought this, Nakamura suddenly opened his mouth.

"Shut uuup Aoi, *I'm the one who lost.* Something like this is enough, so let's go. "

Looking very unhappy, he spat that out. The mood froze. Oi oi, is this really all right?

"Ehhhh! Was *that* how it went! Aren't you amazing, Tomozaki-kun! Shuuji, don't mind it!"^[9]

It was the *slightly* teasing, affectionately nuanced kind of don't mind. The mood softened.

".....Shut uup, idiot!"

While laughing as if astounded, Nakamura retorted to Hinami Aoi.

"Heeh, but, to win against the can-do-anything Shuuji, Tomozaki-kun must be very strong! Amazing..."

"N, not particularly"

"Next time I also want to try fighting you!"

"I-I think it might be best if you stopped that..."

"Right! Sorry, got caught up in the mood!"

With that, Hinami Aoi laughed with an *ehehe*. What's this, she's *super* easy to talk to. This must be that so-called communication skills thing. Furthermore, Nakamura, in spite of having his loss declared, was simply standing at the side with a thin smile as if watching over a child. Could this also be a result of Hinami Aoi's follow up? If I assumed that to be the case, it had truly been amazing.

"Ah, well I'll be, heading to the cafeteria."

"Okay! Bye then. Do teach me the ropes next time, even if it's just the basics."

"A-ahh."

"...ext.....in"

In a small voice, Nakamura said *something*.

"Eh?"

"It's nothing, bye."

Wh, what?

"Err, b, bye"

"Bye!"

Thus, I received Hinami Aoi's second goodbye from the back as I walked off towards the school cafeteria.

...Some, somehow it turned out alright. I felt relief.

However, I get it now. Since the follow-up was appropriate, even though that topic came up, in the end, with some careful treatment, the swelling had amounted to nothing. An option unavailable except to a riajuu. It was something I'd have in no way been able to use to my brain to conjecture.

Be as that may, for Nakamura to have declared "I lost" by himself was something unexpected. Due to that, the hate directed at me hadn't had to accumulate, but..... As I reflected on this amongst other things, I arrived at the cafeteria.

In this way, the small explosion that took place was, by way of Hinami Aoi's overwhelming communication skills, able to be amiably wrapped up, shrunk, and given new form. Things like a riajuu's superb self confidence, or reckless raising of the tension in the atmosphere, I couldn't stand them all, and had thought of *those* as pointless; however, I could not help but accept that Hinami Aoi alone was amazing. In that manner, my sense of values had been changed slightly, it was that sort of significance that this small incident had held.

Then, on the Saturday that arrived, a *large* incident took place.

'I've arrived!'

'I'll be there in about another two minutes'

'Understood!'

The day of the appointment with NO NAME. As for our method of correspondence, our mail addresses had previously been exchanged with a 'If you need to get in touch, please use this!'. It would seem that NO NAME had already arrived. Only travelling one station, with a jolt of the train, I too reached my destination.

'I've arrived.'

'Understood! I'm in front of the East Entrance convenience store.'

'Roger that! Please let me know what you're wearing.'

Upon exiting the east entrance, could be seen from the front convenience store there was an ashtray, with several males smoking cigarettes. I wonder if it's somebody among them.

My cell phone's vibration sounded. I opened the mail. Eh.

"The top is a white and blue shirt, the bottom is a black skirt!"

—female. Ah, well, so that had been a possibility. Against my better judgement, I had arbitrarily assumed them to be male but, certainly, it wasn't particularly unnatural for them to be female ^[10]. Thinking as such, I arrived nearby the convenience store, and upon surveying the scene, I caught sight of a lone female staring at a vending machine. White and blue shirt, black skirt. It's this person.

Their appearance from the back was approximately shoulder-length silky black hair, skin a translucent sense of white. The face couldn't be seen but they were probably fairly young. It'd be nice if the voice didn't betray my expectations.

"A-ah, excuse me, might you be NO NAME-san?"

Skillfully said. At being called, the head of the black haired, innocent maiden turned. Just what kind of face would they — Eh.

"Nice to meet you! Yes, I'm NO NAME... .. ha?"

"... Eh ... ? Hin..."

"HAAA!?"

In comparison to the astonished voice I had raised earlier, Hinami Aoi let out a loud shout. Hinami Aoi!? The heck is this?

"Eh... Hinami...san?"

"One moment, let me calm down. ...You are, if I remember correctly, Tomozaki-kun, right? From the same class."

"Ah, ahh, that's correct..."

As I had thought, rather than being the splitting image, it really *was* the actual Hinami Aoi. I mean, ever since the earlier astonishment, she had been acting kind of strange. Her tone of voice was also completely different from usual. How should I put it, there was none of that cheerfulness, but instead, an icy impression. Considering all this, the kind of performance she'd normally put on was nowhere in sight.

"*You're nanashi?*"

An incredulous reply that was also, to say the least, overbearing. I answered flusteredly.

"Th-That's right..."

".....!"

Guh. Her brows began to furrow. What's this. The Aoi Hinami I knew was not the kind of girl I'd expect to make such a frightening expression. Something more innocent and cute...

"Isn't this the worst....."

"Eh?"

"If possible I'd rather not believe it. That nanashi's true identity would be this kind of no-hoper."

"Hi-Hinami-san?"

Just now, what did she say? "This kind of no-hoper"? Shouldn't someone of her disposition not be using that kind of language on another person? The heck is this? Split personality? No, *I'm just too disgusting*, is is *that*?

"Wh-What's wrong? Hinami-san, wait, your appearance is... and your tone is kind of..."

"...!"

Greatly leaning backwards, with a terribly uncomfortable looking expression. With how unbelievably her face was contorting, her emotions were all too easy to read. Usually that face would be used for cuter feelings, but...

"Ha... When it comes to Atafami, I somehow manage to lose control of myself."

"Huh?"

"But if you've seen this much, it's no longer of any concern."

"Concern...?"

"Tone and appearance, right? Enough already, with this it's no problem."

"Uhh, by no problem, just what do you..."

It exists doesn't it, a problem. A lot of them. Who *is* this? That's the kind of level of confusion, really.

"....."

"....."

Then a moment of silence suddenly appeared. Awkward. However, Hinami Aoi, with a dignified expression, didn't display any intention of finding words with which to cover up this unpleasant atmosphere.

"At... at any rate, err, that NO NAME would be Hinami-san, it's surprising... or something."

...I even made my words for filling in the gap in conversation come out in a jumbled mess. Even though the intention was for it to flow smoothly.

"That's right. I too was disappointed. Someone like you who doesn't even possess a fragment of aspiration, resigning yourself to a fate of losing at life, a

trash-like human being is, the only one I had respected, that nanashi."

".....Ha?"

I had always been belittling myself in my heart, but hadn't expected that it'd be from the outside world that I'd receive the final blow. Such heartless abusive language. Things like *a trash-like human being*. Earlier there *had* been use of things like honorific language, but that *had* was past-tense. I'd been completely preoccupied by the gap between the her now and the her in school being so large but, being deprecated to this extent, I could no longer hold my silence.

"Wa-Wait a moment. Uhh, why did I, to that extent.....have to be told this?"

"I'm just saying the truth, though."

"*Truth*? That's not... there are things that are good to say, and there are things that are bad to say, isn't that how it is?"

"What's with that?"

"To someone you don't really know that well, *no aspiration* or, *resignation to a fate of losing*? That's... that kind of sermon, there isn't any right to give it, isn't it impolite, is what I'm trying to say....."

"If you're talking about being rude to a person, shouldn't you stop talking like you've got something stuffed in your mouth?"

"There's nothing *in* there!"

I let out a loud voice, at last getting out a phrase without biting my tongue. Hinami Aoi brusquely looked in my direction.



"..... Though well, that's right. Impoliteness is impoliteness. Therefore I

apologize for that. Excuse me. When it comes to that game I get a bit fired up. ... Even so, allow me to speak impolitely. The personality I had uniquely respected was, the type of person I hate the most, after all."

"Like I was saying, that kind of thing is..."

"If you're discussing the *etiquette* of conversations, shouldn't I be able to talk about the *person*? Just what is with that attire."

Haa? Isn't that completely unrelated. Like, there wasn't a dress code.

"Ju-Just what do you mean? Isn't something like attire up to the individual to decide?"

".....Haah. As I've been saying, this is exactly the part that I *hate*."

"Ha?"

Still saying that? A while ago she had apologized completely.

"When meeting a person, furthermore, meeting someone for the first time, there's a minimum standard of attire that one should have, right? Well, this time, coincidentally it wasn't the *first* meeting but, that should have been the intention for the first meeting, isn't it so? Just what is with that wrinkled shirt. Doesn't it need a proper ironing? Also, the cuffs of those trousers, they're tattered aren't they? How long have you been wearing those? Haven't you ever felt like buying a replacement? A high school student who is still wearing those high-tech sneakers, that's something I haven't seen in a long time. They're covered in dirt, and the shoelaces are also worn out. I wonder, isn't it easily understandable from the way they're left untied when walking. Look, even that hair, isn't it bed-head. Did you properly style your hair? By any chance, did you *not even look in the mirror*? Meeting someone for the first time when in such a state, can be called '*impolite*', is that not the case? *Tomozaki-kun*?"

Having it pointed out, I became conscious of it myself. I hadn't paid it any attention, but, well, certainly, saying I had tidied up my personal appearance might not be possible. Well, I got that part. But, just what is this person's problem. Just why does she, to some guy she doesn't really know too well, have to suddenly go this far in stabbing them repeatedly?

"B-But, that kind of thing, doesn't it have nothing to do with you, it's the

person's freedom of selection."

"Ha?"

"That's right. You think it's fine like that, so to *you* there's no problem. Just, about the meaning of what you said, '*impolite*', you're *also doing the same thing as I am*. That's all I'm saying here."

"The same thing?"

"Well, in reality this wasn't actually our first meeting so, there isn't really any need for you to apologize. Supposing it really *had* been a first meeting, there *would* have been a need to apologize, though."

Far from being disdainful as if looking at an actual piece of trash, Hinami Aoi faced me with a repugnant gaze.

"..... Be as that may, considering what has been *said* up to this point, as expected I've been one sidedly impolite. I don't believe I'm *wrong* but, for my *impoliteness*, as expected I will have to apologize again. Excuse me. The desire to talk about ATAFAMI and to do a revenge match has vanished. Goodbye."

Saying so, Hinami Aoi turned around in the direction of the station and walked out. That expression was fleetingly visible.

—That the me who *should* have been planning to say goodbye as soon as possible to that kind of rude girl, had, over here, now involuntarily opened his mouth, it *might* have been due to annoyance at what had been said earlier, or else the way in which Hinami Aoi's expression for that fleeting moment she had looked over her shoulder had felt like disgust rather than disappointment; what the reason was, even I was unable to judge.

"...Just wait a moment. Don't go around saying as you please on your own here."

Hinami Aoi stopped moving and looked over her shoulder.

"Was there still something else?"

I had unconsciously blurted that out to keep her from leaving, but to tell the truth I hadn't had anything in mind. No impatience could be read on Hinami Aoi's face. Rather, something like disgust as well as anticipation was visible. My

mind had whited out; all I could feel was my fingertips that had become cold to the touch.

"You, were saying something about me losing at life, weren't you."

At this point even I wasn't sure what I wanted to say here. The sound of my heart was echoing in my lungs, causing my brain to shake.

"Someone who has had high parameters from early on like you, of something like my feelings, you have absolutely *nooo* idea."

Perhaps as if to repeat my words, Hinami Aoi opened her mouth very slightly but, whatever she was saying, I was already at the point of being unable to hear it. I wasn't really aware of what kind of tone of voice I was talking in either.

"Life is *unfair*. Someone like me, unattractive, of poor physique, overthinking things so never being able to take a step forward, mentally weak, ridiculed no matter what they do, possessing neither communication skills nor self confidence; *that* kind of human being, just how are they meant to win against a strong human being like you?"

This was perhaps the first time I had ever said something like this to a complete stranger.

"But isn't it fine like that. Due to that inequality. Doing one's best bears no fruit. If it gave results *then* I'd do my best. But in Life, there are *nooo* rules. No reward. No correct answer. Isn't it a *kusoge*? Then, there's no use in trying your best is there, since there's *no* correct answer. To *begin with*, you know, the kind of life led by *riajuus* like you, I hate it. With nothing more than baseless self-confidence, crowding together like you're having fun."

Now that the dam had been broken, the flood of words could no longer be stopped.

"Even if the foundation for it is there, I don't possess the feeling of something like self-confidence. Even in a crowd, there's still a feeling of solitude, so I *can't* come to enjoy myself. That kind of way of living indelibly stains one's body. I don't even know a single cause behind it. Is that bad? When I came to my senses, it was that way, this is how I am. I'm fine like this. This solitary, but in its own way enjoyable everyday, it's fine as it is."

I clenched my fist.

"...*That's why, don't impose on my sense of valueees!*"

—Suddenly I felt a burst of passion. The mist that had been flickering from the beginning had now been cleared, and with the return of my vision, I was recovering my sense of composure. Gradually, I was able to make out Hinami Aoi's facial expression.

Hinami Aoi was, expressionlessly, just steadily looking here.

"... The whining of a loser."

Then, Hinami Aoi, vacantly said as such with a tone of voice as if simply pointing out the truth.

"What's with that."

"I said, *the whining of a loser*. Hate for the riajuu-like life? Even though you have never led the life of a riajuu? Just like a fool. Do you *know* why you hate it? Had you, after tasting the enjoyableness of the life of a riajuu, *then* said it is not enjoyable, that would be logical. But, you haven't ever tasted it, have you? If that's the case, isn't that just sour grapes, the whining of a loser."

... a similar line of reasoning, I had a feeling I knew it from somewhere. In addition, from a source quite close to myself.

"You know, I, of the people who in spite of their loss, justify it without putting in any effort, *those* people are what I hate the most."

Truly, a familiar line of reasoning.

However, well, *this* and *that* are different.

"What you want to say, I understand. But, you know, the situation's *different*. In *life*, well, chara alterations are *impossible*."

"Chara?"

"At the instant of birth, it's to some extent *already* been decided. Were I like you, a kyou-chara with a pleasant face, able in studies and athletics, then I'd be a bit more successful. But, that's *not* how it is. I don't know if it's sophism or rebelliousness, but far from being rather irrelevant to Life, if you think about it,

if just self-confidence and motivation are lost from your parameters, your attribute values are given the cold shoulder, and there's *nothing you can do about it!*"

Hinami Aoi just silently stared into my eyes.

"It's the character difference. That's why it's fine, like this. Besides, I *do*, fairly seriously, believe this situation to be enjoyable as it is right now. Therefore! Just leave me alone..."

"...Character difference, huh."

Hinami Aoi's eyes faced downwards for a moment. Suddenly, outside my expectations,

"Come."

She grabbed my arm.

"Eh?"

I was, in a state of bewilderment, more than half against my will, dragged off somewhere by Hinami Aoi.

Translator Notes:

[1] Original: 腫れ物扱い. Literal translation is something like “the treatment one would give to a swelling” ... I think. Which I decided to at first interpret in this context as: just ignore it until it goes away->best to leave things be. A more accurate TL would probably be along the lines of -> be extra cautious so as to not touch the subject.

[2] Yamatonadeshiko: 大和撫子, personification of an idealized Japanese woman.

[3] Original: しのぎを削る (互いに力を出し合って、激しく争うことのたとえ)

[4] The *ike* used here is presumably a shorter version of *ikemen*. (For which, if you've been reading previous translation notes, you should already know the meaning).

[5] Nakamura's given name. Kanji: 修二

[6] I have no idea what he was trying to say here before cutting himself short. Original: かばっ, and I'm *pretty* sure he's not saying the Japanese word for hippopotamus. It could simply be カバー, but can't really be sure here.

[7] Once again, couldn't think of satisfactory equivalent that flows well in English, but I'm sure you understand what it means. She's kind of expecting him to finish his sentence. Likely accompanied by nodding.

[8] otaku-kimoi-warota: A bit like *otakugrosshaha* ?

[9] ドンマイ !

[10] Yes, he just assumed NO NAME's gender.

PART 4

And so, I was currently, with my back curled up, looking small and quiet in a state of seiza ^[1], boredly looking around, searching for the point of departure of this sweet smell. Something matching an aromatic or incense could not be found. However, the odour was fragrant and feel-good to the extent that it would be impossible for the original source to not be present. What *was* present, was a white sheet and a light yellow towelket ^[2] covering a bed. Placed on top of them was a pink pillow and a dark, fluffed-up pajamas that had a lived-in-feel. On top of a small, black, elliptical desk, there was only a cute orange pen and a black lamp. Pure white cabinets and bookshelves. A stylish black study table. Pale pink carpet. The other objects present were everyday items that used warm colours as a basis to convey a sense of lovability and freshness. There should have been no spare time to use something like a spray beforehand.

With that being the case— cloth?

Clothes or bed sheet, towelket or carpet, if one were to assume that the smell of such things acted as the room's odor, sublimating through the air, then it was possible to comprehend. However for the sake of implementing this, frequent

cleaning, washing, and maintenance should be essential. If I hadn't seen the suddenly changed Hinami Aoi not too long ago, "*I see, just as one would expect of the perfect heroine Hinami Aoi*", is the kind of understanding I would have happened upon, but this was no longer to be.

Just what is with this woman. Saying whatever she wanted as she liked. Making me say things I hadn't even wanted to say. Generally, to a young man of similar age who you don't even know very well, something like suddenly dragging them to your room against their will would be considered ill-mannered and...

I was, right now, inside the room of Hinami Aoi!

Becoming ever so slightly aware of this, I averted my eyes, but this was a serious state of affairs. Entering a girl's room for pretty much the first time, not knowing the proper conduct for such an occasion, for the time being I had decided on performing seiza, but there were probably a number of things wrong with that. The girl in question, Hinami Aoi, had left behind the mysterious words "You said, *chara difference*, didn't you?" just like that, and had after several minutes, yet to return; if this persisted any longer, I would probably die of mental suffocation.

With my jumbled thinking, one way or another I had managed to deceive myself, but I was already at my limit. *Someone*, please give me peace! **Ton Ton Ton**. Came the sound of someone going up the stairs. Aah, that reminds me, this room was on the second floor. I was panicking to the extent of forgetting even that detail. Most likely, it was Hinami Aoi returning. **Gacha**. The door to the room opened.

"..... Uhhh, apologies for the intrusion."

I greeted the unfamiliar female who had entered. At the very least, the part of communication skills that covers greetings, or should I say, etiquette, was something even I possessed. If compared with Hinami Aoi, in all honesty she wasn't that much of a beauty, but, in those features, the traces could definitely be seen. Likely it was her younger sister or something, probably. "*For that flawless bishoujo to have allowed this kind of boring male into her room, just what is going on*", was probably the kind of thought going through her mind, I

think. I'm well aware of that, so I'd prefer that you don't let those words escape from your mouth!

"How is it?"

"Pardon?"

"The house's upper floor..."

"Uhhh, what might you mean?"

".....You *really* don't have any experience with females, do you."

"Wha...?"

For what reason do I suddenly have to be told such a thing by this unfamiliar female, I wonder. The Hinami household, does the urge to suddenly say something impolite to a kimo-ota run in their blood?

"It's my no-makeup face."

"Eh?"

"I'm Hinami Aoi. I removed my makeup. Just how thick-headed are you?"

".....Eeeeeeh—!?"

Certainly there had been the thought that the features were there, but, to have brought about such a change with just that? There hadn't been any impression of heavy makeup; rather, it had seemed completely natural. Just what in the world was this.

"You, talked about chara difference, didn't you?"

".....? I did, but..."

"With this do you understand?"

"...With *what*?"

"Your crime of thick-headedness even extends this far? The appearance parameter, with enough effort, it's always possible to change it however you like, isn't it so?"

"Aah." I see, that's what it was, huh.....

Well, I more or less understood what she wanted to say.

But either way, she had no right to give me that kind of sermon.

"Even if we assume that you *are* a jaku-chara, it is possible to make changes later on. Using your appearance's initial parameters as an excuse to abandon Life, that's something you shouldn't do."

Haah. This was kind of, *different* to what had been promised.

"...What? Did you bring me here to give that kind of common sermon?"

"Well, to put it simply, that's right."

"It's none of your business. Didn't I say so? The circumstances of you and I are different. Firstly, I'm a male so I'm not in a position to be applying makeup, so to begin with, that initial parameter is different. The base facial features make up the end of it for me. With that kind of thing, can something be done afterwards? For a jaku-chara, that's how it is. ...Haa, I'm leaving."

Saying so, I picked up my bag and stood up. Perhaps because I'd thrown out everything I wanted to say just now, the nervousness from before had come to disappear.

"You really don't understand anything, huh."

".....Was there still something else?"

"Do you know the essential components of a human being's appearance? Please try give about three."

"I said I was leaving, didn't I? Do I really need to keep playing along with you?"

"With that, it's not just Life, but you even run from a trifling conflict of this degree, huh. A genuine loser."

Just how could she allow such remarks that would irritate a person to come out so smoothly.

"I get it already, shut uuup, since you've gone that far with your words, I'll respond to the provocation. The essential components of a human being's appearance? Their base facial features and, what was it? Stature, and, something like body weight, I guess."

"That's entirely wrong."

Complete rejection.

"Then what?"

"Facial expression, physique, and posture."

Isn't physique pretty close to what I'd been saying earlier.

"No, facial features are-"

"That kind of thing isn't a particularly important problem."

"No, that sort of conclusion is....."

When it comes to appearance, the original face is essential, isn't it? Her answer just now was incorrect, right. The evidence is my life.

"Well then, won't you have a look at this?"

Saying so, Hinami concealed her face with both hands.

Still in that state, after stretching her body, with a **paka**, she now angled both hands outwards as if playing peek-a-boo. Eh.

"How is it?"

".....I'm not sure what happened there....."

With the hands opened, compared to when the face was previously hidden, there was a fifty or sixty percent increase in sociability; quite the beauty had manifested. Hinami Aoi who had decided to appear without makeup, that's the kind of the impression I got. No, the impression should have been the same as just now, though.

"Do you understand now? It's the facial expression."

"No... that's no longer on the level of facial expression is it?"

"Then, just how would you explain this? Some kind of substitution sleight of hand? Or else, instant plastic surgery?"

While saying so, this time, without covering her face, Hinami began to slacken her face. Returning to her previous self-styled expression. Just when I'd thought that, little by little, she transformed back into that fairly sociable beauty. She repeated this several times.

"Ooh....."

I got the feeling like I was watching some kind of very well done performance. To tell the truth, this was quite amazing.

"To be able to do just this much, it's only because I had put in the effort to that end, though." while saying these words, she slowly alternated between the two. "Incidentally, do you understand that it's not just the face, but also the posture that's shifting?"

"Eh?"

Having being told so, upon watching closely, when power was being lost from her face, she was at the same time hunching her back; when she was transforming into that sociable beauty, she was at the same time straightening out her spine.

"Posture also changes the impression of the face. Facial expression and attitude, with just those executed perfectly, for a 'Riajuu-like appearance', they're more than enough. Well, nevertheless, it's because I am blessed with the raw specs that I can become this much of of a beauty, though."

"*Well*, don't you possess *such* confidence in your *good* self." [3]

"That's right, that's exactly right. Self-confidence is also important, isn't it."

"I didn't say it with that kind of meaning, you know... So? What's up with that?"

"Do you not get it?"

.....It wasn't that I didn't understand. With the flow of how things had been going, with this being shown to me, well, in summary-

"Almost all of the unattractive guys can become average looking or better, or something, is what you want to say here, I guess."

"That's a good guess."

"Then, *so what? That's why you too should keep at it*, is that what you want to say or something? Didn't I say so already, that's unnecessary meddling."

"It's not that kind of thing."

"Then what?"

When I said this, Hinami, while gazing deeply into my eyes, no, as if even peering into the depths of the depths of my mind, said the following.

"This is why, the human beings who are like the current you, have the ugliest hearts in the world."

"Wha....."

What was that, so suddenly.

"Though, that's human beings who are like the '*current*' you."

"Cu-Current me?Even if you try to make it sound profound, even if you misrepresent it like that..."

"From here on out what I'm saying will be for my own self-satisfaction. I won't mind if you ignore it. You might think that I'm giving you orders here but, in the end, the one making the final decision is you. It's also not a problem if you simply disregard everything. Under that premise, please hear me out."

Hinami Aoi, intercepting my words, said as such, changing the mood . Her tone of voice and gaze didn't have any feeling of mocking in the least. As lacking in communication skills as I may have been, I could still tell that Hinami could not get any more serious than she was right now.

".....Al...Alright."

One would not have thought that I was in fact of the same age, considering the manner in which I said this while being overwhelmed by the silent, unwavering intensity.

With that positive confirmation received, Hinami now spoke out, with neither the slackened face from earlier, nor the face of a sociable beauty, but rather, with an unhappy expression that was in some respects a reflection of human weakness.

".....You said this earlier, did you not? '*I possess neither communication skills nor self-confidence, while in comparison, you had high initial starting parameters*'. However, there's no such thing. I truly am nothing but an average person. No, I was living my life in a manner even worse than one.At least as

far as elementary school. That's why, I'll be frank. The things you talked about like communication skills and self-confidence, all of them can be changed however you like with *effort*. The me that debuted in the first year of middle school is proof of that."

A strong tone that made me sense that within herself, there was a definitive basis to her words.

".....You also said it was irrational and unfair, right? However, that's wrong. The game called Life, operates using a few simple rules. They just intersect in a complicated manner, so you aren't able to grasp them."

Regardless of whether I believed her words or not, I could sense the content entering my mind.

"I respected nanashi. I had won all manners of things just through *effort*. That's why, that method of putting in effort, with regards to continuing in that fashion, I had confidence that I wouldn't lose to *anyone*, and because of that, I had the confidence to be able to produce results. However in Atafami, no matter what I did, I was unable to reach nanashi's level."

Gesturing only ever so slightly, it was just words being spoken.

"Therefore, I had thought that nanashi was a human being that was able to put in more effort than myself, and it was precisely because I thought this, that I revered nanashi. But, when I tried lifting the lid, I got this. The nanashi in Life, *to say nothing of losing*, isn't even putting up a good fight, furthermore, is the type of human being that uses their qualities possessed since birth as an excuse to escape and move on. No, let alone that, is someone who, without even experiencing the fun of Life, arbitrarily decided on it being uninteresting, using himself as justification, an unsightly loser."

Being belittled to this extent, it was a wonder how rage had not sprung forth. Perhaps because I had been overpowered by her earnest intensity—or, rather than that, I had the suspicion that it was because I had realized how *similar* I was to her in some respects.

"I'm an amazing human being. You think so too, don't you? To the point that you might wonder if a sixteen year old in Japan who was this amazing could really exist. But, over that sort of me, you gained victory in one field.

Additionally, at the same age, in a field where there is no advantage nor disadvantage due to gender. —That's why, let me say it. The fact that you, who is gaining victory over that sort of me is, the nanashi who I uniquely respected, and is in the game called Life, in this of sorry state of affairs, this makes me irritated from the bottom of my heart. *Unforgivable!* The *worst!* For the human being who I'm losing to to be a good-for-nothing, by extension doesn't that make me look like a good-for-nothing too!"

That, despite being told this much, it did not appear likely to have been out of arrogance, this was probably because I perceived this person's implicit behind the scenes, blood-running-like endeavours.

"Superior games are always simple, this is my pet theory. Thus, when the game called Life appears to have no rules, the truth is it is a beautiful structure where there are only simple rules that have been interlaced. You've been saying that it's a kusoge, but far from it, Life is pretty much a kamige that can't get any better. It's just that you haven't realized it yet. Is it really okay for *nanashi* of all people to be defeated in this kind of wonderful game? Is it really okay to lay the blame on the game and run away from it? Is it really okay to leave things as they are, as the whining of a loser?Tomozaki-kun. I have one proposal for you. No, I'm giving you an *order*."

The leaves and branches might be completely different, but this was the first time I had seen such a human being with a way of thinking so similarly rooted as mine.

For this reason.

"I'll be teaching you the rules of this game, one by one. That's why—"

Reluctantly, I had already consented to this person's words.

"This 'Game' called 'Life', face it seriously!"

This was, the large incident that took place on Saturday.

Translator Notes:

[1] Seiza (正座) is a Japanese way of sitting 'correctly' (do an image search if

you haven't heard of it before). It plays a central role in traditional tea ceremonies and things like that.

[2] Towelket: Japanese-English word combining towel and blanket, often cotton.

[3] Not sure how to explain this, but he uses uncharacteristically formal language when saying this sentence, *i.e.* as if saying it with sarcastic intent.

You may have also noticed a bunch of Japanese onomatopoeia indicated by asterisks (**gacha** etc.), which I won't (and can't) translate. They're quite self-explanatory, anyway. I mean, open your front door. Say 'GACHA!'.

PART 5

"Well, I get what you want to say."

It was probably the first time that someone had preached this much to me with what they truly thought, devoid of facades or any of that crap.

"I'm relieved that's the case."

Hinami Aoi had yet to tear down that expression that was like a reflection of the depths of her heart.

"But there *are* some things I don't understand."

For this reason, I was unable to provide an appropriate response on my side. Positive or negative.

"I consider this game called Life a kusoge. I can provide as much basis as you like, and, moreover, I even hold a considerable amount of conviction in this belief."

Kyou-charas benefit, Jaku-charas are exploited. There are no simple, beautiful rules. It's a kusoge.

"Right."

"That's why, what you say, that life is a kamige, or that it's all an excuse, or that it's the whining of a loser, those things I don't quite get."

"Uhuh."

"However..."

"However?"

As I recalled that Nakamura had laid the blame for his defeat on the game.

"Without putting in the effort, misrepresenting the loss by blaming it on the game is the most unsightly thing in the world, of *that* I'm in agreement. I too hate that kind of thing the most."

When I said that, Hinami Aoi lifted the corners of her mouth into a wide grin.

"Heeh. As expected of nanashi."

"But there *are* still cases where it truly is the game's fault. There are many games where you can overcome chara difference through technique, but, amongst them there also exist games where there *are* no ways to overturn chara difference."

"Life is one of those 'games where there are no ways to overturn chara difference', that's what you want to say, right?"

"That's right, that's why Life is a kusoge."

"As per your inner thoughts, that is."

"Possibly. Though, I certainly don't know how to look at Life in the same way that you do."

"That's certainly the case."

"Uhuh. Of course, that much is obvious. A person isn't really able to look at Life in the same way other human beings do. If it were a game, they would be able to do things like try out a kyou-chara themselves, but in Life there's no such thing as trying out another person's perspective. That's why, I have no choice but to believe in my own way of seeing things."

"Right."

I looked straight into Hinami's eyes.

"*That*, is my way of thinking."

This time, there was clearly disappointment in Hinami Aoi's expression.

".....Is that so. If that's the case, never mind. In the end, you've decided to stubbornly—"

"But."

I cut in.

".....But, just this time, I *might* be willing to listen to your side of things for just a little bit longer, is what I'm beginning to think."

I willed myself to once more look at Hinami Aoi in the eyes. Ooh. Beautiful.

"And, why's that?"

"That's....." I had to think for just a little while. "That's because, what you're saying, how should I put this, resembles my beliefs too much. In spite of you being this kind of riajuu and this kind of beauty. If it's the words of some fellow resembling me, mightn't it be a bit useful for reference? That's one thing."

"Hmph."

"Well, that's not the *biggest* reason, though."

".....Which is?"

Hinami Aoi gave me a look that was a mixture of both interest and doubt.

"That the one who's been saying these things to me is, the sole gamer in Japan that I acknowledge, 'NO NAME'."

Saying so, I once again strengthened my gaze.

"....."

"....."

".....So uncool."

Hm? Even though I'd been expecting a, *Then it's decided!*

".....Wait. 'Uncool'? What's with that?"

"I said it because even at the very end, you're awkwardly trying to show off. So uncool."

"I had to muster all my courage to do that, you know. Have some sympathy!"

"I don't care. Furthermore, ultimately you haven't even said the important thing."

"Show a little more regard for the struggles of the communicationally disabled, won't you? I'm the type that grows when praised."

"Have you done something that deserves some sort of praise? If anything, I'm disappointed. That this much is enough for nanashi to change his own opinion so easily."

"Ha? Easily? Where do you get that from? Moreover, I haven't changed my opinion. I just thought it would be worthwhile listening to what you have to say for a little longer."

"How is that different from changing it? To me, they look the same, though?"

"*Wrong*. I trust a gamer. Additionally, in Japan you're second placed. Which means to say, it's the fact that, of all people, the person who I'd next place my trust in after myself, came up to me and said 'There are things you don't know'. That's why for the time being I'll just try and listen to their story, that's all there is to it."

"Isn't that what's called a change of opinion?"

"Like I said, that's *wrong*. For the time being I'll try listen to more of the contents, and then I'll confirm for myself whether or not I agree with them, isn't that all it is? It's still a long way away from implying acceptance. If I don't agree, I won't be accepting it, you know."

"But you'll still listen for the time being, correct?"

"Well, yeah, that's right. I *am* nanashi. I know just how much how much blood-running effort goes into just one match of a game. So I've judged there's merit to listening."

".....Hmmpf.....That's fine then."

That's fine then?

Arguing this much, and being able to converse with a classmate without pausing, it's pretty impressive of me.....is what one would think, but, really,

within, I was treating this person as NO NAME rather than Hinami Aoi, so it probably wasn't at all that amazing.

"Then, teach them to me. The things you call this game's rules."

And whether or not 'Life' is *truly* worthy of being called a kamige.

"Haah. Tomozaki-kun, you *really* don't understand anything, do you. Didn't I say so? The rules intersect in a complicated way. There's no way they can be taught so easily."

"They can't be taught? What's with that, that's different to what you said before, isn't it?"

".....Then I'll ask, when buying a new game, if you want to get good at that game, do you read the instruction booklet thoroughly?"

"What's that so suddenly?"

"Just answer the question. Do you?"

".....No, well, I *do* read the instruction booklet but, in order to get *good* at it I'd have to try playing. Without actually coming into contact with the game, I wouldn't be able to understand its essence."

"Don't you think so? It's the same thing here."

"The same thing?"

"You won't get good at the game by studying the instruction booklet. Life too is the same in that respect."

"Life too?" I thought for a moment, but faster than I could work out a response, Hinami spoke out.

"For a game, you'd try jump in without really reading the instruction booklet, right?" I nodded. "It's the same as that. Without playing, you won't get good."

.....No, isn't that strange? After all, aren't I trying to play right now?

"Wait just a moment, it's because I stumbled a lot after I tried to practice in Life, that things came to be this way then?"

"Precisely. Then, at times at which you're stumbling in a game, what do you do?"

"Eh, in a game? Well, it also depends on the genre, but.....I'd raise my level, or train, or look at a strategy guide site, it'd be something along those lines....."

"As expected. That's correct."

"Ha?"

"Even in Life, raising one's level, or training, or browsing a strategy guide site, it's good to be doing those kind of things. They form the roots and trunk for the game known as 'Life'."

Saying so, Hinami smiled widely.

".....Hold on, no, well, what you're trying to say, I get it. Therefore, level up, in other words, put in the effort, right? Well, certainly there isn't really any alternative."

"That's right."

"But you know, it's not going to work as well as in any other game, for that game you call Life. Even if you put in the effort, it won't become a reality. The limit has already been decided by the initial state, there's no overturning it. That kusoge structure, that's what Life is. Well, you probably wouldn't understand.....being a kyou-chara and all."

"Do you *really* understand?"

"Understand *what*?"

"Levelling up is self-improvement. Starting from your external appearance or from what's inside, the operation of raising the foundational abilities you possess. Training is the improvement of your technique for getting on in the world, in other words, specifically, the refinement of practical skills. With those two points, you should be able to clear the larger half of the game called Life."

".....No, didn't I already say I get what you're trying to say? *But*, well, it's not so easy. For a jaku-chara like me, be it levelling up or training, a mountain of futile problems exists."

"Correct. Leaving aside whether you have or haven't been doing that sort of thing up to now, those circumstances do exist too."

"What, so you admit that those circumstances *do* exist? Isn't it hopeless

then?"

"However, those futile problems, that is to say, the times when you're taking on a 'Difficult Stage', a method to solve them exists. You said it, didn't you? Levelling up, training, and..... one more."

Which would mean.....

"That would be—"

"Yes. The *strategy guide* sites."

".....Then, just *what* are those so-called strategy guide sites? A self-development book or how-to book, is that it? If you look at those kind of things, you'll somehow be able to cope, I assume is what you want to say?"

"Ara." Hinami smiled strangely. "Well, that interpretation is acceptable; *however*. However, being more precise, there is only one strategy guide site in the world where if you were to just abide by the advised rules, things would turn out alright without fail."

"And what is that? Something that convenient, surely there's no way it exists?"

"But it does exist. To my knowledge, in the world there's just the one and only."

".....And as I was saying, what *is* it? Just where does that kind of thing exist?"

When I inquired, Hinami, with a "That's, well", used her index finger to slowly tap her head two times.

"It's this."

An expression overflowing with self-confidence, almost like she was making fun of me. *Isn't it obvious?* I could hear her about to say that.

".....You, how should I put this, your confidence in yourself goes *that* far?"

Haha. I laughed inadvertently. Relieved at having been able to get to the heart of things.

"Isn't it obvious? It's inevitable that I would have, up to now, accumulated the necessary parts for this game's strategy guide. That's why, the causes of getting

results, they're all drilled into this brain of mine."

"The causes of getting results, huh.Are those what you call Life's rules, then?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Hmmm....."

The rules of Life that I knew were 'Kyou-charas benefit, Jaku-charas are exploited'. Someone might seem uncooperative or cowardly, but can be seen as strong by trampling on people's feelings. There's nothing but those kind of soured rules, that's why 'Life' is a kusoge. However this person, was boasting that there other rules to 'Life', moreover that these were even rules that mean 'Life' is a kamige.

Since they were presently producing results, there was certainly persuasive power. The stump of their way of thinking was close to mine, and we could also agree on some things. Which is why, accepting what this person had said—that is to say, to seriously face this game called Life. It might seem alright to concede that much.

But that's wrong. It's wrong. This person is wrong. Probably, she and I aren't able to understand each other.

Well, that's how it is. In the end, this is what this kind of thing comes to. I tried raising a question.

"Hey.....Life is supposedly a kamige right? Then, I've got to ask, *how much* of a kamige?"

That's right. When it comes to myself and a human being who praises the game called 'Life', there is a large discontinuity here.

"How much?Let's see, to the best of my knowledge....."

She looked up, at a loss for a while.

"It's far ahead in first place, isn't it?"

See, look at that.

That's precisely it. The people who sing praises of 'Life is a kamige', in the end,

place all other games in a much lower position. Just conveniently likening 'Life' to a 'Game', the truth of the matter is that they consider only 'Life' to be a special existence. In other words, that they descend to consider the same point of view as human beings who love games, that kind of self-important point of view. From the outset, they've decided that other games are, in comparison to Life, worthless, looking down on them, and after making fun of them, *then* only likening Life to a game.

As I had expected, this person was the same. Despairing, I silently picked up my bag and prepared to stand up.

At that moment.

"Un..... as one might expect, it's far ahead, tied for first place, alongside Atafami."

Hinami Aoi, as if taken by surprise, as if let-down, said this all too naturally in a pure tone of voice.

"Eh?"

"Un, I was lost for a while there, but as expected, it's not possible to come to a decision over which one comes out on top, is it. Truth be told, here it would've been more desirable for me to be able to definitively say that 'Life' comes out tops, though.Tied for first place, as frustrating as it might be."

—I was completely taken aback. A first place tie? Between Life and, Atafami?

That's really what this person is saying right now? That riajuu who's so far ahead, Hinami Aoi?

"Disappointed? Well, certainly, you're someone who has mastered Atafami, aren't you. Then, there probably isn't any value in you trying another game that is only just about as interesting, is there."

".....You,"

Far from something like disappointment. I had now, unconsciously—

"That's right, you're already in possession of the top position in the highest-ranking game.In that case, even though I need to be able to offer you something with more value.....aah, I made a mistake. Truly, this habit of

running wild once it becomes a matter of Atafami is really....."

Murmuring this to herself rapidly, Hinami then once more turned to face me.

"Well, the one who needs to provide an answer is you, basically, and however you do so doesn't really matter. Telling a lie to gain your confidence would also be wrong, it can't be helped, can it."

Wrong, *wrong*. I had now, unconsciously—been *completely* emotionally moved.

"I....."

I stopped, as if unable to complete my sentence. For me, up to this point, unbeknownst to anyone else, the reason that I had continued to train in Atafami, was just that I had wanted to play it. I had wanted to become strong. Doing so was satisfaction for me, and happiness. It was all good. It was enjoyable. However, I'd had the self-awareness that this was probably, not something that anyone in my surroundings would recognize. Of the same level as being told on the internet that I was amazing, I didn't even have any game-loving friends, I wasn't praised by my parents, and there was no way I would become a popular person in class for my achievements. I also wasn't athletic, and of course, had no girlfriend. In the meanwhile, I had continued to spend time on Atafami, and the results had come. All of it, had just been for my own sake. Truly, I had been fine with that. It was fine to not be praised by anyone, is what I had thought.

But right now, this person who was, to the best of my knowledge, the strongest *riajuu*, this person had said, 'Life is a game just as interesting as Atafami'. In other words, 'Atafami has, about the same worth as Life', words possessing that kind of significance, had been declared so matter-of-factly.

—By this person who understood 'Life' better than anyone else.

That I had been emotionally moved by this might certainly be contradictory. I had considered 'Life' to be pointless, a *kusoge*, is what I had thought. Which is why — *This kusoge is on the same level? Stop fooling around, Atafami is way more interesting, Atafami is the kamige here!* — it would be natural to expect that kind of opposition.

However, I, in the most publicly recognized game 'Life'. In 'Life', that I would be told by this person who, to the best of my knowledge, had produced more results than anyone else, that Atafami held the same value—that had been unthinkable.

Effort for which I had thought, that it wouldn't matter even if it weren't recognized by anyone else. And then, along those lines, effort that nobody had recognized. In other words, taken from me, effort solely for my sake. I hadn't thought I was dissatisfied by that, and had probably even thought that it couldn't be helped. But, now.

Unbelievably, I had received affirmation.

"What is it? That face."

".....I" Without me realizing, I was now hanging my head downwards. "I think, anything that has rules, is a game. If there are rules, if there are results based on those rules, then it is a game in its entirety."

Hinami Aoi stayed silent, waiting for my next words.

"Supposing that 'Life' has those, then 'Life' is a game. And then, supposing that, if those rules are simple, and on the inside, beautiful and profound, then it's a kamige, and if that's not the case, it's a kusoge. Would your thoughts still be the same?"

"Yes. Certainly that would exactly be the case. Rules exist, therefore, 'Life' is a fully fledged game. And..... those rules are simple, and beautiful and profound on the inside, so it's a kamige, 'Life' is."

".....Is that so. I understand." I lifted my head. ".....If that's the case."

"If that's the case?"

Then, I looked straight at Hinami.

"It's got my gamer's blood all riled up."

Hinami's face turned the colour of astonishment. I had no idea what kind of face I was making but, Hinami seemed to have adopted that astonished expression as a result of seeing it.

"This doesn't mean that I fully trust everything you've said, though."

I directed my words towards the gamer right in front of me.

"Before my very eyes, there is a game. This game, the degree of difficulty is high, but humans all over the world are unanimously participating in it, so the player base is large. I had judged it to be a kusoge after playing it just a little but, it appears that, according to information from a reliable source, the truth is it appears to be a kamige. And, before my very eyes, that experienced person is there, and has offered to teach efficient strategy guide methods. If so....."

Ignoring the dumbfounded condition of Hinami, I continued.

"There is no reason to *not* play it **like – a -game**."

Having finished with what I had to say, looking in Hinami's direction, the astonished *Hinami* from earlier had vanished before my eyes, and in her place, was the figure of *NO NAME*, floating a feverous smile.

"As expected of nanashi, huh."

"Ah, well."

"I wonder, don't you already completely trust me?"

"As if. In this way, I'll try playing, and until I've confirmed that it *is* a kamige, there won't be any such thing as trust."

Right. It didn't mean that I trusted her.

But this person had the same gamer-like thinking as me, and had properly raised another game in the same arena as Life, and then, declared that Life is a kamige. —A kamige, on the same level as Atafami.

If that's the case, if it's just trying it out for now, it should be all right, is what I thought.

"But with games, there's kind of that issue. If it's just to the extent of trying it out, it's impossible to make a judgement as to whether or not it's a kamige. If I'm going to try play it, if I'm not serious from the beginning, it'd be meaningless. Because I don't want to be making excuses."

"Quite so, right."

Hinami, while laughing, nodded her head in agreement.

"Therefore, it's in order to become that riajuu, in order to conquer the game called 'Life', that I'll be playing? In that case I'll decide to try it out. However, I won't hold back. That should be fine, right?"

Hinami, with an *of course*, once again nodded her head.

"Then, what would be a good way to go about things? For me."

"Ara, you're quite eager, aren't you."

For some reason, it seemed to be with delight that Hinami said this, as she stood up and started rummaging through the drawer of her study table.

"What are you doing?"

"Life is a game with a very high degree of freedom."

"Hm? Well, that's true."

"In a game with a high degree of freedom, what's the first thing to be done?"

"Hmm?"

In a game with a lot of flexibility, huh. Like a game where you can steal cars or do things like kill a member of the general public, or a game that lets you stroll around the city naked or steal items from a shop.

If I were to say what they had in common.....

"Well, that would be character creation, right."

"Onitada."

She said, a serious look on her face, extending her finger.

"Eh? What? Oni? Tada?"

"So, the first thing you need to do, is also character creation."

"No, *what* was that just now?"

".....What do you mean? Aren't you imagining things?"

Averting her eyes, she talked brusquely. Just what was that earlier? It felt like I remembered having heard it somewhere before.

Actually, the heck was with that? *Imagining things*? Oi, she was ignoring what

had been said just a while ago. There seemed to be no choice but to move on with the conversation.

".....Umm, character creation, was it?"

"Yes."

Showing a tranquil expression, Hinami Aoi. It had become a nonexistent thing of the past. I don't really get it. Well, whatever.

"But, the creation of the «character» that I am, shouldn't it already have been completed?Well, it's a bit of a plain character, though. Hahaha."

"Your thinking is naive, huh. Use this."

While even ignoring the small joke of mine, Hinami Aoi retrieved something white from inside the drawer.

That is..... No, wait, *wait*.

".....Oi. Surely you're not going to also say that I'm constantly going to have to use this to hide it, right?"

"It's nothing of the sort. There's a much more meaningful way of using this."

As for the object in question now held in Hinami Aoi's right hand, it was a large mask used for hay fever.

PART 6

".....m home....."

Not saying it to nobody in particular, but simply because had become a custom to do so upon arriving home; it was in that kind of volume that I announced my return. Upon me entering the living room that was necessary to pass through in order to get to my room, my mother, noticing my appearance that was different from usual, called out.

"Fumiya, that, did you catch a cold or something?" [1]

"Nn, ah, aah."

That wasn't actually the case, but there was no way I could explain the circumstances, so I gave her a vague affirmation.

"Even though if you'd said you needed a mask, we have one at home. Did you go out of your way to buy it yourself? That."

"Nn, ah, no, a friend gave it to me when I said I'd caught a cold."

"Ara. Is that so? Heeh....."

A kind of surprised, impressed expression. Even without her putting it into words, I knew quite clearly that *So you had the type of friend who gives you a mask for free when you catch a cold, hm* is what she wanted to say. Such is the bond between parent and child.

"Anyway, welcome home. I'm going to prepare the food, so you can go ahead and—"

"I *know*."

We're talking about the thing I always do soon after getting back. That is, taking a bath. With a *Hai hai*, I interrupted her sentence mid-flow and headed towards the bathroom.

"Ah, but right now is....."

Gara

"Ha, haii!"

Caught off-guard by the underwear-clad figure of my younger sister inside the dressing room, I replied by way of a mysterious response.

".....Onii-chan's really gross, huh."

Giving that sort of me a sidelong glance, not behaving particularly surprised, was my younger sister, indifferently wearing a sweatshirt. Black, lumpy, and baggy-sized. A black bra that didn't quite match the right size for her unassuming bust, was concealed underneath.

"It's a lie, right."

"Ha?"

In such a state, wearing only a sweatshirt over her underwear, suddenly

turning around to face me, saying something incomprehensible. Wait, is she even wearing anything down there, I wonder.

"That."

She pointed at the lower portion of my face.

"The mask?"

"That you got it from a friend."

"Aah."

So that's what it was.

"After all, Onii-chan doesn't have a friend who'd do that kind of thing for him."

"Hey..."

This kind of troublesome thing was possible because my younger sister was enrolled one year below me at the same school.

"It's better not to make lies that can be found out, you know?"

She was a first-year, but one wouldn't have thought we were blood-related, comparing the difference in merit between that useless physical appearance and that bright personality, on account of which her upperclassmen, in other words, my classmates, with whom she was acquainted were numerous, and so news on me would reach her fairly well. Actually, just why do I have to be mentored by my younger sister regarding the proper method of lying?

"I do know that sort of person, though."

I *had* practically received it as a gift, and wasn't really lying.

"Then who? Who'd you get it from?"

"Why do I have to say that kind of thing?"

"See, you can't say it, as expected, it's a lie."

Haah. So troublesome.

"Hinami Aoi."

"....." She peered at my face with a **jii~**. I'm *not* lying, you know. Had she

given up? "Haaa....."

For some reason, she breathed out a sigh.

"What is it now?"

"Um, you know? That kind of thing doesn't qualify you to say *friend*." An extremely astounded tone of voice. "The fact you received a mask from Hinami-senpai, it's because Hinami-senpai is an angel. Understand? She's equally kind to everyone. To call her a friend because of that..... You could call her a classmate at best, right?"

Putting on a performance in an pitying tone of voice, I was lectured like a child. No, I hadn't thought she was a friend to begin with at all, you know. Even supposing that I had, it'd more mean war buddy. Calling her an angel or something is unreasonable. If she'd have said Valkyrie, I'd have understood.

"Onii-chan, don't do something like misunderstand and fall in love, okay? That would be embarrassing for me, right?"

You could at least say, "embarrassing for me *too*", don't you think? What selfish thinking.

"Who would fall in love with that kind of ill-mannered woman?"

".....Eh? What?"

"It's nothing."

"Aah, mou! It's already bad enough that you chew on your words regularly, but with the mask on I can't hear you at all!"

As she said that, my younger sister vigorously tore off my mask. Ah.

".....I really don't get the meaning. Gross."

Saying so, she unhappily passed by my side.Well, this was understandable.

"Well yeah, the meaning.....I don't really know either."

As for the person left behind, reflected in the mirror of the dressing room was the figure of a kimoi otoko ^[2], pointlessly floating a smile that stretched to the corners of his mouth as far as possible.

Translator Notes:

[1] Fumiya (文也): Tomozaki's given name.

[2] In case you haven't watched enough anime to recognize the term, kimoi=gross, otoko=male/man, and leaving it there as *gross man* or *disgusting man* just didn't sit well with me.

PART 7

I looked on with perplexed eyes at the mask that Hinami was holding in her hand.

"Besides concealing part of the face, just what use could that have? ...
Actually,"

And, on top of that, I emphasized how perplexed I was by the surrounding landscape.

"..... why did you change the location?"

Hinami had, after retrieving the mask from the desk's drawer, invoked for the second time "Come with me", pulled me by the arm, and dragged me to a pasta restaurant near her house.

"Concealing is concealing. But, the important thing is, after concealing it, what do you do?"

What to do after covering it? Not.

"Wait wait, just why did we come to a pasta restaurant all of a sudden?"

"Look, it's here."

Thus, Hinami ignored the bewildered me's question, and the waitress brought our meals.

"Thank you for waiting. Your Japanese-style mushroom pasta and three-cheese carbonara."

"Thanks."

The carbonara was placed in front of Hinami, while the mushroom pasta was placed in front of myself.

"No, like I said,"

"It's delicious here, you know."

Hinami said while laughing as if truly delighted. Just what is with that expression, so pointlessly cute it was astonishing.

".....Not the issue here."

"Haah, well, just listen."

With a sigh mixed in, saying so and pointing at her own mouth. She began displaying her earlier technique of becoming the beauty from before and then reverting just when I thought things had settled.

"Ooohh~" **pachipachipachi** ^[1] "Wait, *no!* Just what is going on?"

"Aren't you persistent. It's because I was hungry, that's all there is to it."

Saying so, Hinami ate a mouthful of carbonara. Twirling it with her fork, carrying it on a trajectory to her mouth, creating the slightest opening before placing inside the twirled pasta, and then moving so as to slowly extract nothing but the fork from her lips. It was all carried out elegantly and beautifully, with fascinating sensuality. My eyes unconsciously followed her tongue as it stuck out to lick up the sauce clinging to her lips.

".....Un, delicious."

Hinami murmured slightly as she let an innocent, natural smile rise to the surface. There was no half-assery in how pointlessly cute it was.

"In other words, you know.....it's the facial expression."

Facial expression?

"You mean the smile just now?"

"Ha? The smile just now?"

"Ah, no, it-it's nothing."

I had gotten too caught up in the pointlessness and unintentionally blurted out something strange.

Thankfully, Hinami didn't pay any particular attention to the matter, and hastened to continue the conversation.

"Understand? This is the state of the mouth of a beauty."

With that being said, when I looked closely, the corners of her mouth were raising slightly, and in response the areas around her cheeks also had the impression of being tensed. Indisputably a beauty. With sociability too. However, looking fixedly, how should I say, well, this person's face is really cute. Conscious of this, I couldn't look at her in the eyes, though.

"And this is the state of otherwise."

All aspiration vanished from Hinami's face. Looking closely at this state too, the corners of her mouth drooped, and areas around her cheeks were slacking. Even wrinkles had been created around the sides of her nose. It wasn't to the extent of being plain, but whether she could be called a beauty or not was a grey zone.

"Ho~" *pachipachipachi*

"What do you mean, Ho~. Isn't that the face of an idiot. Shouldn't this be a scene for admiration?"

".....Y-Yes."

I'd been slightly overawed. No, as expected, she's not the least bit cute, this person.

"Do you understand? In other words."

Hinami raised the corners of her mouth.

"For my everyday, I'm always in this state." Next, Hinami lowered the corners of her mouth. "You're always in this state."

"Th-that much? I am?"

Involuntarily, I was even a little surprised myself. Well, as one might expect, I wasn't thinking that the corners of my mouth would be raised, but, I was a little

discontent at myself being used for the bad example, and wondered if she was getting carried away.

"Yes."

In a way so as to make me wonder if she had been preparing the response, she thrust out a hand-mirror. There was the figure of my slackened face.

".....I see."

"Understand?" I totally got it now. ".....Looks like you do, huh."

"Wait, but I can't see how the face can change so much with just that. When it comes to my face, the corners of my mouth are plain as they've always been."

"You do a lot of back talk, huh."

"I can't help it, can I? It's the sentiment of a sixteen year old."

"Let's leave aside the matter of whether you are plain or not." Putting it aside for me. Unexpectedly she also had some kind parts to her. "You don't seem to get the importance of the shape of your mouth."

"The importance of the shape of the mouth?"

"Right."

Hinami started to talk while using the spare intervals in between to eat her pasta, and I too followed suit and began to eat. On doing so. —*Delicious*. Extremely delicious. What *is* this? So tasty. What's this, it's amazing.

A savory aroma of moderately singed butter and soy sauce scored a direct hit starting from the nose to the brain. Upon taking one bite, the grease seeping out from the bacon mixing well with the deliciousness of the mushroom, viscously dissolving on the tongue, a rich flavour permeating the cells. Upon becoming aware, at the same time, a springy texture of noodles was even imparting delight upon the jaws.

".....Too, too delicious.....!"

This kind of delicious pasta really existed in this day and age.....? *Hinami, you have my thanks.....*

With a glance in Hinami's direction, enveloped with feelings of gratitude and

being moved on an emotional level, I could see Hinami, her eyes blurred, with an extremely wistful expression on her face.

"Doesn't yours also... seem delicious?"

Despite the indifferent tone in which she said this, Hinami looked alternately at my face and my pasta.

Uhh, this would be.....as one would expect, at the level that even a communicationally challenged could tell what should be done.

".....Want a bite?"

Upon which Hinami opened her blurred pupils wide, resulting in a cute expression that was a bit difficult to look at directly.

Then with a "Thank you. I'll be taking up that offer then", she inserted a twirling fork into my pasta. Carrying it to her mouth, opening wide and eating. Even sporting a sensual expression of ecstasy.

Having become briefly fascinated by that expression, I realized a moment too late.

"Ah!!"

"Wh-what?"

Hinami spoke as if she didn't get the situation. Wait a moment, I mean, wasn't this that so-called, mouth to mouth, thing, but, carried out indirectly, isn't that what just happened.....!

"No, I mean, wasn't that an, in...direct.....kiss....."

When I had resolved myself and finished my sentence, Hinami raised her eyebrows, making an amazed expression.

"You know. It'd have been one thing if it were something like a plastic bottle, but minding something as trivial as this, shouldn't that have stopped in middle school?"

"Eh? Ah, uhh, it's something I wouldn't normally care very much about..... what is it?"

Ignoring my agitation, with a "Haa. Rather than that, I'll be continuing the

conversation, alright?", Hinami stiffened her attitude.

"Assume that two sunglasses-wearing males are talking. Their eyes and eyebrows are hidden. The contents of their conversation can't be heard, but their figures can be seen."

"Wha-what's with that so suddenly."

I still hadn't broken loose from the confusion brought about by that indirect thing, though. Ahh, but the pasta's delicious.

"Assume that one side is a riajuu, while on the other is a hiriajuu. [2] Of those two, which is the riajuu, and which is the hiriajuu, do you think you'd be able to judge by looking?"

Was this related to that earlier thing about the shape of the mouth? Uhh, of the two wearing sunglasses, which would be the riajuu.....

"Uh...well, if they really were in front of me, wouldn't I kind of be able to tell?Ahh, delicious.....by their hairstyle, or behaviour, or attire, I'd manage somehow."

I answered while chewing on the way-too-tasty pasta.

"Then, supposing, the case where both are sporting crew-cuts, and wearing a suit?"

The case where their hairstyles were both crew-cuts and attires were suits, huh..... I tried imagining the scene in my head.

Crew-cut and sunglasses for both.....wearing suits.....mumble.....talking to someone.

"No, even then it seems like I'd kind of be able to tell."

Hinami nodded.

"Right. Even with identical hairstyles, and eyes and eyebrows hidden away as well. Even under those circumstances one would somehow be able to tell the difference. Isn't that strange?"

"Well, that's true. *Mmm*, this is delicious. It's certainly mysterious."

"Why do you think it is that you'd be able to tell the difference?It's, in

other words, *this*."

Nodding, Hinami once again pointed at her own mouth. No way.

".....It's pasta?"

"Are you an idiot?"

I beg your pardon, of course that wasn't it.

".....Facial expression?"

"Precisely."

"U~n."

"In an expression just like the one I showed you earlier, it's especially just the shape of the mouth from which there is a big difference in a impression from a glance. People perceive that unconsciously, and are somehow or other able to judge a person's character."

Un, well.

"Yeah, it kind of feels that way." There I suddenly realized. "Eh, but wait. That means to say, it's because of *that* that you're always smiling?"

Then, I finished up eating my pasta.

"Well. That's half-right and half-wrong."

"Half?"

"At first I was consciously raising them all the time. But, as my muscles were conditioned, they began to rise by themselves. Un, delicious..... It took several months to reach that stage, though."

"Several months....."

Behind the scenes of that sociable exterior, there had been that kind of effort.

"Well, in any case, the facial muscles or shape of the mouth are important, that's what's going on here, right?But, then, what is it with that mask? As expected, doesn't hiding the mouth defeat the purpose of everything?"

"*Muscle training*."

"Ha?"

"Like I said, *muscle training*. If you're considering conditioning of the muscles, there's nothing other than muscle training, is there?"

".....Just what does that mean?"

Then, Hinami forced a plastic bag containing thirty masks into the chest of the bewildered me, and declared the following.

"For a month from now. With the exception of the times at which you're *eating* or *sleeping*, whenever you're travelling, in class, or even talking to someone, you must *always* express a full smile underneath a mask as you go about your business."

".....Ehh!? *Seriously?* Always?"

While receiving the masks being forced onto me, I raised my voice in perplexity.

"Isn't that obvious? Time is limited. Finish it up within a month."

With those words, Hinami once again reseated herself. Before I knew it, she too was finishing up her meal.

"No, but didn't you yourself take several months? If so, wouldn't it be alright to go at around the same pace?"

"What are you saying? If you did that, you wouldn't be on time for your target."

"Target?" It was the first time I'd heard about that. "You mean the thing about becoming a riajuu in the end?"

"Do you not understand? When you're starting to put in the effort, certainly those kind of big, long-term goals are important. But, at the same time, short-term goals and *very* short-term goals are also important."

"Ahh."

Certainly, when I had been practising in Atafami, it had been in that kind of manner that I had set up my goals.

"If it's you, shouldn't you understand?"

".....Right, well, I do get it"

"As expected. That'll make this faster."

In order to achieve a large goal, one would need to tread through a number of small goals as they progressed. Actually, if one *didn't* do that, they wouldn't really have a sense of what to do at the present time, and above all else, the motivation wouldn't last. At the very least, that was what *I* had done when mastering a game.

In other words.....'Life' is a game too, so the same applies, perhaps.

"Big goals, medium sized goals, small goals, the way you'll advance is by clearing those in increasing order."

"...Which means, the big goal is.....'Becoming a riajuu', is that how it is?"

"Hmm. Well, there's also different degrees of riajuu so, for the end goal, maybe something like 'A riajuu on the same level as me', perhaps."

"Wouldn't that be.....a bit too strict.....?"

"Certainly if it's the greatest loner within the school that is you, and the greatest riajuu within the school that is me, then there is the matter that the gap in between is too wide. But, if you properly manage to carry out what I tell you, it's not like you wouldn't be able to somehow achieve it."

.....For real?

"Well, I get it.So, the medium sized and small goals, what are they?"

"Hmm, well for starters, I'll begin with the small goals."

Gokuri. [3]

"Family, or friends, to be asked by them, 'Did you get a girlfriend or something?'"

.....Pardon?

"So what does that mean?"

"It's exactly as I said, though?"

"Uhh?" Towards the me for whom this clearly made no sense, Hinami's undeniably astounded expression assailed.

"Haah.....even though you're amazing in relation to Atafami, when it comes to Life you completely fail to understand, huh."

She opened the palms of her hands upwards and seemingly deliberately, let out a *yareyare*. [4]

"That's none of your concern."

"Get it? In short, 'For a transformation in appearance to take place, such that it's perceptible to those surrounding you, to the extent of being directly questioned', *that's* what it means."

Uhh. 'For a transformation in appearance to take place, such that it's perceptible to those surrounding me, to the extent of being directly questioned'?

".....So the question would be, *Did you get a girlfriend or something?* That remark?"

"Ahh mou. Anything goes. 'These days, aren't you indiscriminately refined?' or, 'For a moment, I couldn't recognize you there', something like that. At any rate, if you were told words pointing out that kind of 'Large transformation', with that you'd have cleared."

"I-I see."

"It's essential that it comes from your surroundings. It's not enough for you yourself to believe that you underwent a large transformation."

"Ho, hou."

"In other words, from an objective standpoint, the circumstances should be such that one would think that your appearance or the aura you bring about have undeniably been bettered, *that's* what's important."

"I-I get it."

Hinami was annoyed. I could tell from the creases on her forehead.

"Just *how much* do you need me to explain things?"

"Ri-right.But, in what way will the decision be....."

"What is it *now*?"

"Look, I mean, being told something by my surroundings, how would I know whether or not I had truly cleared with those words?"

".....You aren't even able to judge something like that by yourself?"

"So-sorry."

".....Fine. If anyone says something, tell me those words exactly as they were said. I'll decide if it's enough for a clear."

"Ro-roger that....."

I was covered in reluctant shame.

"Then, once that's been cleared, I'll present you with the next small goal in the list. That would be in accordance with the circumstances in that time. As for the medium sized goal.....it's extremely simple."

Saying so, she grinned broadly.

"Before advancing to third year, getting yourself a girlfriend."

Poka—n ^[5]. This thing. Girlfriend? Me? The one who was to have a lifetime pass by as a lone-wolf? Well, the reason for how naturally the prerequisite of me not having a girlfriend to start with was assumed, was probably that it's me we're talking about. Hinami-san, that was exactly right.

"Nononononono."

"What?"

"Isn't the hurdle way too high?"

"Which part?"

An expression like she seriously didn't get it. Is this the difference in mindset of a human being who's had their share of popularity?

"You know, you can get yourself a boyfriend easily so you might not understand, but, for a human being with no popularity, getting a lover, that's outrageously extraordinary right!? Furthermore, now it's June, right? Which means there isn't even a year left to go, right!? Isn't it decided that that kind of thing is impossible for me!" ^[6]

Unconsciously, I stood up and started fervently speaking about my unpopularity. The waitress who had come bringing the after-meal black tea placed saucers onto our table while smiling forcedly. Hinami stayed seated and breathed a sigh. Embarrassing.

"Haa.Then, I'll ask the reverse."

Immennnsely cold eyes.

"O, Okay."

"Of the second year high school students, the males *with* a girlfriend, what percentage do you think that is?"

"Eh.....well, what? About twenty or thirty percent, maybe?"

".....Then, for argument's sake, let's lower that to an estimate of ten percent."

"A, aa." What does she intend to say, I wonder.

"To make things easy to understand, consider a game. Let's see, how about Atafami. You're the number one in Japan, correct?"

"Well, that's right."

"Alright, then, let's assume that there is an absolute amateur present here. Then, that person says that they want to become skilled at Atafami. That's where you make your entrance."

I was cleanly pointed at.

"Mine?"

"Yes. To that person, you are able to in one year, earnestly give them advice such as *control your character in this way*, or, *practice like this*. Then, that person properly abides by what you say, and puts your advice into practice."

"I see."

"In a situation like that, to nurture that person into becoming one of the top ten percent of players from Japan's total population in a single year, how difficult do you think it would be?"

Ten percent, huh. Ten percent would mean the level of about one in ten people, and if coached by the level of the number one strongest.....

That would be, well.

".....Extremely.....simple, huh."

"Onitada."

"Eh?"

"Things turned out this way even with a fairly low estimate of ten percent. In other words, when it comes to you getting a girlfriend before advancing to the next year, if you abide by what I say then it's a simple matter."

This was said rather rapidly.

"No, wait, what was that? That thing just now?"

".....You're imagining things."

What? Are you messing with me? Your face is red, do you think I can put up with you making fun of me and laughing? And yet, somehow, that sounded like I'd heard it somewhere before.....

"Rather than that, you understand, right? It's not that high of a hurdle."

Well, certainly that would be the case theoretically, but.....

"But, Atafami and Life are different, right."

Once again, she sighed.

"Could you please not arbitrarily decide on things on your own? You may be a pro when it comes to Atafami, but when it comes to Life, aren't you a complete amateur? For the time being you've decided to try it out, so obey."

".....Sorry, well, that's true."

I honestly apologized. It was something I had decided on myself. Certainly, the rules of Life, and the method of skilful operation of a character in Life, were things I didn't know. This super advanced practitioner, *did* know, so for the time being I should just obey like a dog. That was the way it should be for a proper gamer. It would be better for one to proceed in that way before judging if the game is a kamige.

"The second Sewing Room, do you know the place?" [7]

"Eh?"

"Like I said, second Sewing Room in the old school building. Do you know it?"

Aah, belonging to our school.....I suppose there was something like that.

It was probably that place. If I went to the old school building I'd likely know it.

"Aah, I kind of know it."

"Right. Then, from now on, every day, thirty minutes before class begins, and after school, come there."

"Wh, what for?"

"For the instructions on what should be done for that day and, for that day's report and reflection to be carried out, isn't that obvious? Without trial and error, where would the effort be? If you're going to do something, do it thoroughly."

If you're going to do something, do it thoroughly, huh. Well.....I agreed on that.

".....O-kay—"

"Nonetheless, there will likely be days when things come up for either of us so, in those circumstances, we'll have to cope with it by improvising. We already know each other's mail addresses, anyway." [8]

"That's true. Well, it'd be very rare for something to come up for me, though. Hahaha."

".....Do you, *really* have the determination to do this? The plan is for you to become in a few months' time, the kind of person for whom after-school plans would pop up, you know?"

Glared at. Rather, eh.

"Seriously?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

Amazing reliability. If that really did come to be, it would be quite interesting.

"Understood. Please treat me well." I lightly bowed my head.

"Ah, also....."

And then, suddenly, with only the most minimum of coolness left behind, Hinami started talking with a sense of confusion. Turning her eyes to the side while prolonging the action of drinking what was left of her black tea.

"Hn? What." When I asked, she gave a slight start. What's this now?

"Umm, well, look, this is sort of, NO NAME and nanashi's offline meet, right?"

What's with this sudden meek behaviour?

"Tha, that's true. What of it?"

"Wha-what of it, just.Look, since it's an offline meet and all that....."

"Hn?"

"Aa mou!"

Hinami leaked out an uncharacteristically emotional voice, after which she cast her eyes downwards for a moment, inhaled, made eye-contact with me in an unnatural way, and,

"That's why, it'd be normal to inform the other of your Atafami friend code, wouldn't it? Is what I'm saying."

Up until now Hinami had always been looking at me in the eyes as she talked but, how should I put it, right now, it kind of felt like, if she averted her eyes, it'd be her loss, and it was because of that, that she was now forcing herself to continue facing me. This was the kind of impression I got.

In contrast to that sternly glaring gaze or pursed lips, how should I put it, little by little, her cheeks were dyed a shade of red. That this was due to neither heat nor anger, was something even the communicationally challenged me knew full well. I knew this, but for this very reason, the choice of which words I should be using for my follow-up, *that* was something I didn't know.

That thing I had been hearing about her emotions upon something becoming a matter of Atafami, applied up to here, did it.

"That's all it isYou seem to want to say something?"

I had no intention of inadvertently provoking and angering her, so I simply replied with a "No, not really", and we exchanged friend codes. With this, we'd be able to carry out friend battles at any time.

I decided to just burn the red face from earlier into my long-term memory. Incidentally, the black tea had *also* been extremely delicious.

Translator Notes:

[1] Clapclapclap

[2] You can tell from the context here, but a hiriajuu is someone leading an unfulfilled life, *i.e.* the polar opposite of a riajuu.

[3] Gulp. Look, I could have put gulp there instead, but then you'd start expecting me to adapt all the other onomatopoeia with equivalencies out there, and there's no way I'm doing that.

[4] Yareyare. You don't know this either? Exclamation of disappointment. Depending on situation, can be relief too.

[5] (°д°)ホカーン Mouth open. Dazed. Astonished. Lost for words.

[6] For some context, the Japanese school year starts in April.

[7] Basically a school sometimes has two 被服室 rooms, the second for when the first is already in use. Or at least that's what I've been led to understand. Also I need a better-sounding translation for this...

[8] Mail address is in the context of a phone's mail address. Recall that they were exchanged for the offline meet.

Chapter 2: When your level continuously rises during a single fight, it is an extremely pleasant feeling

PART 1

Fifty minutes prior to the start of classes. Due to my unfamiliarity with the place, I had come ahead of time but, contrary to expectations, it was easily locatable, and I arrived at the second Sewing Room ten minutes ahead of schedule.

The second Sewing Room possessed a sort of antique atmosphere, and even though right now should have been the start of summer, on the blackboard 'October 26' was written, providing a touch of that ruin-like feel, putting the heart at ease.

Even the dust that fluttered about hectically, appeared mysterious when illuminated by the morning sun. Lined up at regular intervals along the windows were large sewing machines that were old-fashioned, but these instead bestowed a modern impression. The ceramic surfaces that might have originally been white were, perhaps having been baked by the light of the sun, now darkened with a tinge of amber, and something about that exquisite colouration induced nostalgia.

As I was basking in that kind of serene atmosphere, Hinami turned up.

"Good morning, Tomozaki-kun. Well then, it's the memory-worthy first day, isn't it."

"A, aah."

"This atmosphere isn't at all that bad, wouldn't you agree?"

Hinami said as she looked around the classroom.

"Eh, aah, that's true. I don't dislike it, this ruin-like look."

"Ara, so you do understand, you've got pretty good taste, don't you. Since it's a place we'll be coming to multiple times, I chose a good one." Saying so, Hinami took a seat on a chair nearby. "The seats aren't very comfortable though, are they."

She smiled wryly. In front of her, I too sat down. It certainly wasn't that comfortable, what with the slight instability, and lack of a backrest.

"Well, this kind of thing isn't bad either. Retrogames and boardgames, I like those as well, you see."

"Ara, is that so. We should have a match sometime."

"Just as I was hoping for. If you're thinking I'm limited to Atafami, it'll be a painful experience, you know?"

"Fufu, I'm thinking no such thing, you know?However, that should be *my* line."

The pride of nanashi and NO NAME, for an instant, clashed with a **bachi**. [1]

"Well.....so, what happens today?"

".....Right. Shall I get straight to revealing the tasks, then? For the time being, in terms of facing the small goals, I'll have you continue with the mask-muscle training..... After all, we want to hasten the groundwork in preparation for the medium sized goals, don't we."

"Medium sized.....that thing about getting a girlfriend, huh....."

To be honest, even now it didn't seem realistic.

"Just how are you able to emit such a depressing aura even when wearing a mask. This too is a kind of talent, I see."

"Leave me alone."

"Anyway, about that task, it's already been decided."

"Ooh....."

gokuri. [2]

".....Today's task is to 'Initiate a conversation with three or more girls at

school'."

Uhhh.....

"Isn't that awfully uncomplicated?Actually, all of a sudden the Now-Put-It-Into-Practice Volume?" [3]

I had yet to do anything aside from mimetic muscle training, and in addition, those were even things I'd only just begun.

"Any doubts?"

"Uh, I mean, isn't this too soon? What with there not being any change yet in the current circumstances?"

Shouldn't there first be more, say, conversation practice, or mimetic muscle training? I'd have understood if we were to proceed in this way once *those* had been completed, but doing this at the present time, wouldn't it simply come across as creepy?

"Well, I know what you're thinking. But right now, this is what's needed. It's fine, just go along with it."

"Well, if you say so.....alright."

After all, I had decided that if I was doing it, I'd thoroughly abide by her guidelines.

"However, you should pay attention to just a few important points."

"Important points?"

"Yes. Firstly, the contents of the conversations. I'll be specifying these to some extent."

"Specifying."

"I caught a cold, but I'm out of tissues, if you brought any, I'd like one — that kind of thing. Well, it doesn't have to be tissue, anything's fine, but it has to be something using catching a cold as an excuse."

"As long as the cold's used as the excuse, then anything's fine?"

"Right. Starting a conversation with someone you've never talked to before is a bit, well, if there's no visible excuse for it, you'll make them cautious, you

know. Especially if it's from someone who ranks low in the class hierarchy, then it'll warrant a 'Why so suddenly?'. If one could do it naturally then it'd be fine but, at any rate, for you, wouldn't you be starting the conversation in a disgusting way? On that note, if it's a cold, then seeing you wearing the mask just about makes things easy to understand. It's quite optimal."

"I, I see."

I had been bad-mouthed somewhere along the way, but couldn't help but agree.

"Moreover, in the worst case scenario, even assuming you were to interact in an extremely disgusting way, making them back off, once you recover later on, wouldn't they'd amend the matter in their mind with a 'It's because that day he had a cold'?"

"I, I see....."

I see you've also anticipated this kind of sorrowful possibility. Many thanks. I do believe it was necessary.

"And, there's one more important point. Initiating the conversation, must without fail be done at a time when I'm somewhere nearby."

"When Hinami's nearby? ^[4] Meaning, you'll be observing to make sure I'm properly conversing with each of those three people?"

"Hmm.....well, it'd be something like that."

Unexpectedly strict.

"Understood."

"*Good* answer."

"Ah, but you know, when Hinami's nearby, opportunities for me to naturally start up a conversation with a girl, would there even *be* three of them?"

"There would. Prior to homeroom, there's Yuzu who sits right next to you, right. Izumi Yuzu. After that, next to you when we move to the Home Economics Room, Mimimi-chan. Nanami Minami, that is. Naturally starting up conversations should be doable."

".....You remember who's sitting next to me quite well, huh."

"Ara, I memorize the class seating orders every time they're changed, you know?"

What the. Pretty amazing. Certainly if it's those two then timing-wise, I'd be able to manage.....but.

".....That leaves one more."

"You *know*, if it's just one, you can manage on your own at break time or something."

".....Of course, right."

For me it'd be a high hurdle, though.

On this note, the strategy meeting ended, and I returned to the classroom, allowing for some time lag after Hinami herself had done so. Upon which I realized, that's right, it was now already the exact time at which I needed to hurry up and carry out the task of starting up a conversation with Izumi Yuzu. Current mental preparedness: not so stable.

Actually. Thinking properly about it, why did it have to be Izumi Yuzu, of all people? A member of the so-called ike-ing group. ^[5] She wasn't the boss-character of the group or anything, but was still, well, a bright, loud voiced, frequently laughing, cheerful and openhearted girl. Moreover, the matter of how she would wear a necktie on some days, this too was proof of ike-ing.

At Sekitomo High School, the system in place was such that girls could choose as they liked from either a ribbon or necktie but, as a kind of something inherited from the seniors, there existed a sort of tacit understanding that, somehow or the other, *"Girls lower down in the hierarchy should not wear neckties"*. Izumi Yuzu was such that she'd interchange them whenever she so pleased, not paying particular attention to either one, and it felt like she even possessed leeway beyond being in a position to do this. Incidentally, this random modernistic school tradition, along with being popular with the students, also had the reputation of, *they're trying too hard to stand out in spite of the location being full of rice paddies, so uncool*. Such is the fate of Saitama.

Well, in any case. A short skirt, not always a ribbon but occasionally a necktie

hanging loosely around the base of her neck, and a brightly coloured cardigan, Izumi Yuzu. This kind of textbook example of an ike-ike girl. The appearance of the kind of girl who some might call a so-called slut ^[6]. Also, *huge* breasts. She possessed a considerable sense of purity, and while she belonged to the *cute* category so there wasn't much of an overpowering aura, it was with *this* Izumi Yuzu that I had to naturally strike up a conversation. Certainly, without using an excuse like a cold, it would be impossible.

As I sat down, Izumi Yuzu was, as if searching for something, in her own seat rummaging through her bag. Once she found that something, she'd probably leave her seat and merge with the ike-group that was gathering at the window. Right, looks like it's now or never. Hinami, also confirmed to have vision. Yosh.

Let whatever will happen, happen!

"Ah, sor, sorry, Izumi-san, just a moment."

"Hn? Oh, Tomozaki-kun? What's the matter?"

As expected, she seemed slightly confused at being suddenly called out. However, with just a glance in my direction, with a popping motion her cheerful open heartedness seemed to have acknowledged the situation. From the tiny gap in between the buttons, her large breasts could fleetingly be seen. The fastened buttons were being tightly pulled apart by her large chest, and there was a tight horizontal crease being created in the area between her chest and side. In other words, her breasts and the cloth were in close enough contact with each other, such that I reflexively imagined their shape. Huge. But, just why does such a riajuu girl, wear a size of shirt that seems like it's about to burst? Is she picking a smallish size on purpose, perhaps? I can see them, so please stop that.

"Eh, uhh, do you have a tissue or anything? I kind of caught a cold but forgot to bring my own....."

While continuing to put on an air of poor health, exerting maximum self-restraint so as to avoid directing my gaze at that bosom, and furthermore, beneath the mask, expressing a full smile from the muscle training, just what kind of voice was I producing, I didn't really know.

"Eh, aah, yeah, hold on.Ahhh, sorry! Didn't bring any!"

A hands-together "*sorry!*" pose. With both arms now brought closer together, her large chest was emphasized even further. Not looking, not looking. Still, that was a rather *acchaa~* ish riajuu-group-like light reply. I was relieved at being able to receive a response more similar than expected to one bestowed upon an ordinary human being.

"Ah, of course you wouldn't, sorry, it's fine, it's fine."

Saying so while thinking, "*Sorry and It's fine? What's up with that?*". Then, immediately after. Izumi suddenly looked over her shoulder with a to the person seated behind, as in a surprising turn of events she enquired, "Heyhey, bring any tissues?". Woww, unexpected, unexpected. This kind of motor-reflex-like human relations ability to automatically ask another person, it's pretty amazing.

"I do have some, yes..... Here....."

The response was in a gentle tone of voice but, immediately after being asked, she was already presenting the items. What a speedy development. Does she always have a packet of pocket tissues at the ready on her desk or something, this girl.

Uhhh, Kikuchi Fuuka-san.

It would be wasteful to sum up her description in the typical category of cultural girl with light complexion and short dark hair, that's just how much of a unique, dainty ambiance her fairy-like existence possessed. Even without looking closely she was a beauty. A tendency to look down, her long eyelashes standing out. For some reason, she'd use honorific language even with classmates.

"Thanks! Here you go, tissue."

She presented the tissues to me just as cheerfully as she had cheerfully received them from Kikuchi-san.

"Tha, thank you."

While saying so, glancing for just a moment in the directions of both Izumi

Yuzu and Kikuchi-san with the intention of expressing my gratitude. Such a thing was as sincere as I could manage. Izumi Yuzu, perhaps having found during the time she was searching for the tissue, the item that she had been looking for prior to me speaking to her, which appeared to be a small hand-mirror, then stood up from her seat, and with a *See you*, headed over towards her friends.



With that, it suddenly became a one-on-one. I had yet to blow my nose. I'd

accepted the tissues still inside their packet, so until I blew my nose and returned the rest, this situation wouldn't come to an close. Kikuchi-san, having nothing else to look at, was vacantly looking in my direction, making things strangely awkward. I wanted to promptly return the packet after putting on an act of blowing my nose. Still, despite her gaze being vacant, I could sense power behind it, how mysterious. Her irises, shining bewitchingly like the treasure of a dense forest.

I had at some point unconsciously turned to seat myself sideways, so with the situation left as it was, her shining eyes would be able to perfectly capture the moment of me blowing my nose. However, I was conscious that adjusting my posture to face forwards would *also* be awkward for some reason or another, so I remained where I was, removed the mask, and blew my nose. I kind of had the feeling that, after all, it'd probably make sense for Kikuchi-san to redirect her gaze on purpose, but she was vacantly staring with those magical eyes at the scene of nose blowing. What's with this space. A drama with passivity.

Having finished blowing my nose, I once more glanced in Kikuchi-san's direction, upon which Kikuchi-san shifted her line of sight slightly downwards.

".....Err, thanks."

".....Yes."

Seeing *only* this, one *might* take it to be the scene of two innocent, smiling people, but since it was after blowing a nose, there would be no such thing. I solemnly returned the packet of pocket tissues. Then, I went to the dustbin to throw away the used tissue, and once again returned to my seat. Mission complete. I wonder if this would count as starting a conversation with two people? As I was thinking about such things,

"Tomozaki-kun"

"*Hya!?*"

A surprise attack from Kikuchi-san's perfectly clear voice, like a breath blown in the ear carrying directly to the brain.

"Wh, what?"

"Umm....."

Hmm? Had I been inadequate somehow? Kikuchi-san had a fairly puzzled look.

"Umm.....I'd like to ask a question....."

"Eh.....?"

"Umm.....why....."

Why.....?

"Why.....were you laughing?"

Hah-hah-ha, looks like I've gone and done it.

In the end, I flusteredly came up with, "It probably looked that way because my teeth kind of hurt so I made an *ii~* face", with which I, at least superficially, got through the matter somewhat, but with a "Oh, was... that... it...?", Kikuchi-san's eyebrows were fully knitted, and there were even question marks quite clearly floating in her eyes, so in actuality, I probably hadn't gotten through it at all.

How was that? Thinking this, upon glancing in Hinami's direction, she was putting on a show of sighing exaggeratedly, so as expected that had probably been no good. She was definitely imparting ill feelings. Nonetheless, well, regardless of the finer details, I had fulfilled the minimum requirements. While reflecting on the points of failure, I couldn't help but be under the impression that it was likely a big step forward.

Now then, the next time would be fourth period, Home Economics. I was anxious once again. Here, I had to start up a conversation with Nanami Minami of 'Mimimi' or possibly 'Nanana' fame. Referred to as this on account of *mi* being one of the two types of sounds making up her name, it seemed like nowadays *Mimimi* had become the main. Long black ^[7] hair on white skin, a smart appearance with well-ordered facial features, a look similar to a Japanese doll, yet, energetic cheerfulness was her special trait. Like Hinami, currently a member of the track and field club.

If I moved to the next classroom too early, then myself and the other loners would likely, in our respective zones of isolation, perhaps as if to project a 'Please do not mind me'-like atmosphere, sit down ambiguously while looking

at notes or a textbook. Since I disliked being swallowed up by such a mood, I would usually go to the library by myself to pass some time before moving.

Since it was rare for someone to would stop by the library during this ten minute break, it would usually be myself and another person, who would may or may not be present. Incidentally, I would only be pretending to read, instead analyzing Atafami tactics. But today, there would be no spare time for visiting the library. I needed to get to the next class as fast as possible in order to strike up a conversation with Nanami Minami, or else, another girl, if there was a chance.

No sooner than third period had ended, bringing along my Home Economics textbook and workbook, writing implements and loose leaf paper, I exited the classroom.

Upon arriving at the Home Economics Room which was, just as I had imagined, full of a *Please don't mind me* atmosphere — plus X ^[8]. There were two loners seated separately, however in my group, or rather, neighbouring seat, was my aforementioned target for this time, Nanami Minami, *already seated*. Why? With her workbook open, working on something with a mechanical pencil. In any case, this was my chance, though if I were to talk to her here, then on account of the rest of the room's silence, the conversation between myself and Nanami Minami would represent the entire proportion of this classroom's sound. It wasn't particularly a matter of being overheard by the other two students present, or even of my own uttered voice to filling the classroom, but for whatever reason, I found it a rather formidable task.

Pretty unforgiving... now, how to proceed? I'd like to do this afterwards, but..... Hn? Actually, wait, that's right. Hinami wasn't here. Hmm, since she had to be looking, it would be meaningless to do it at this point. I see, I see, I'll have to do it just a little later. Let's do it after more people have gathered.

In this way, I worked out a perfect excuse, and with my mental state reassured, sat down in my seat next to Nanami Minami.

"Hn, what's up, Tomozaki-kun? So early!"

Whyyyyy!

Nanami Minami, who up until just now, should have been facing her workbook in silence, had, the moment I had seated myself beside her, instantly, without even a thread of hesitation, as if she had originally been in the process of doing so to begin with, started talking to me. Due to the free-flowing naturalness with which she'd started the conversation, for a moment I was taken in by the illusion of "There's no way I'm being talked to here", but she had clearly said *Tomozaki-kun* there.

I couldn't afford to ignore her *now* but, the '*Reason for arriving so early*' she was asking for, if I were to answer honestly, it'd be with a '*It's so that I could talk to you, you know!*', and saying something so gross would probably get me killed. That being said, I was by no means a quick thinker when it came to communication. Therefore,

".....Uh....."

"Hm?"

".....Uh, umm, well, just because."

"Ahh, that so? Well, I know, right? That'd be the case right!"

It ended up like this.

Still, to be able to do something like respond to a completely fruitless "Just because" reply with a "I know, right", the ability of young girls these days to empathize was amazing. Would I too reach this level at some point?

Rather, what should I do in this situation? Now that I'd begun the conversation, should the silence continue, I wouldn't be in a state of '*Working Separately*', but a state of '*Engaging in Conversation but Not Following Through*', and I'd be judged by the God of Atmosphere. Though of course, I didn't have any safe topics like *Recently, television has been...* or, *That guy in our class is...* to use at hand. At this timing I recalled the tissue pretext, and well, given how bad things were already, was considering that method, then realized it would be quite unnatural.

Which was why I already had no choice but to desperately struggle my way out.

"We, well that kind of thing's pretty amazing though"

Timidly, speaking as naturally as I could manage.

"Hn? What is?"

Nanami-san looked blankly in my direction, her eyes rounded. A clear voice, but with volume to it, reverberating in the classroom.

"I mean, something like the 'Just Because' just now, despite a completely fruitless answer like that..."

"Un?"

She didn't seem to get it. Well of course not.

"Despite all that, to be able to answer 'I know, right!', well.....I was thinking, the ability of young girls these days to empathize is amazing....."

— Nanami-san was silent, like her brain's processor wasn't following well enough to figure out what to say. Well of course that'd be the case. I had simply voiced out my exact thoughts from earlier. There was neither shape nor substance.

"....."

"....."

That was bad. Ahh, no good. Awkward atmosphere. Completely my fault. Not good at all. Conversations, how do they work? I had given them a go since I was told to, but going through this kind of experience was...

"Ah never mind, sorr—"

"Ahahahahahahaha!"

"Eh?"

She started laughing like crazy. The two other people in the classroom snuck glances in our direction.

"Eh, wh, wha"

"Just what are you saying, Tomozaki-kun, are you some kind of middle-aged man? Ahahahaha!"

Wha, what the heck is this?

"Eh, no I was only thinking that young girls these days are....."

"Tomozaki-kun's also young, though! Ahahaha!"

"Uh, um, I'm only....."

".....Yeah, go on? Only?"

Trying to hold in her laughter, excitedly waiting for my reply. I'm just saying what I honestly think, though.

"Look, recently high school girls have been using '*yabai*' in conversation to mean all sorts of things, right..... ? It's just like that, the issue here being the empathy of young....."

"Ahahahaha! Stop it! Stop saying things like someone on a variety TV show! Ahahahaha!"

I was saying it in all seriousness, but it only made her laugh even more. Just what is going on here, honestly. While I was being laughed at, from time to time the other students entering the classroom would glance in our direction with a "Tomozaki and Mimimi!?" kind of look.

"I mean, it's something I'd only heard about before, but now that I've also experienced it personally, as expected seeing the real thing has more of an impact to it, or something....."

"Ahahaha! What's with that, *impact*!"

"Kind of a valuable sample, I thought....."

"Like I was saying, are you a middle-aged man! There's so many *samples* around you, aren't there? Ahahahaha!"

"Minmi～. What's going on?"

This question came from Natsubayashi Hanabi, a close friend of Nanami-san and in the same group, with her seat directly in front of Nanami-san's. Delicate and petite, bob-hair on a childish face, with small movements, it would be appropriate to liken her to a small animal.

"Aaah, Tama! Aren't you're as tiny as always～! " – while saying this, Nanami-san *washawasha'd* Natsubayashi-san's head ^[9]. I don't know how it originated,

but she was called 'Tama' just as one might call a small animal. Incidentally, 'Tama' also referred to Nanami-san as 'Minmi', the origin of which I wasn't really aware of either.

"I don't need that kind of thing! Answer the question!"

Natsubayashi-san, while using one hand to sweep Nanami's elbow away, from a visibly under-150 ^[10] low angle, let fly a pointed rebuke. Her way of speaking was severe, but it carried absolutely no impact.

"Tama's really scaryy~"

"Don't change the subject! Explain!"

"Sorry, sorry. You see, Tomozaki, like a middle-aged man, umm, what was it again? Nnh well, I dunno! Pass!"

"Haa!?"

"Heh-heh-he~. It's something only the ones who came to class early could enjoy!"

"There's no such thing! You there, uh, Tomozaki, right? Okay explain!"

The spearhead of the not-so-scary rebuke turned to face me. Rather than that, what pierced me deeper in comparison was the fact that my she had been so unclear about my name.

"Eh, me?"

"Is there any other Tomozaki present?"

"No....."

"Okay then, stop hesitating so much!"

"Hang in there Tomozaki!"

With both hands clenched, placed on either side of her face, laughing jokingly

.

"No, even if you tell me to hang in there..... well, you know, basically....."



With the mood like this, I did my best to explain. During which, Hinami

smilingly entered the Home Economics Room together with several friends, took one look at the situation we were in, froze for a few seconds, then reverted to her smiling self.

".....is pretty much what happened, but"

"Ahahahaha!"

"That wasn't funny at *all!*" (*Natsubayashi-san.*)

"Ehh—. But it *was* funny～"

"Not! Minmi's head is just *weird!*"

"Ehh～. That's so cruel! Ahaha!"

"Don't *ahaha* me!"

The feel-good feeling was decisively sliced through by Natsubayashi-san. This girl didn't even have the *em* in empathy, huh. Even amongst young girls there seems to be all sorts. Well, I *did* get laughed at despite speaking so seriously, so I agreed with Natsubayashi-san.

"Uhm, I didn't find it very funny either....."

"Ehh— ! "

"Right? As I thought, Minmi's weird!"

"I don't think that's true, though～. Isn't it just that Tama's a child and too young to understand—?"

"Noisy! Annoying!"

"What's with that, ahaha! But, isn't that right, Tomozaki? Tama's a child, right?"

Eh! At this point, asking me!? Without actually considering things like *Is she a child?*, I wondered what would be a good response. What should I do. I didn't have anything tactful to use. More appropriately, I didn't have any choice but to say what I thought.

"Uh...mm.....I don't really know if she's a child or not."

"How can you *not* know!"

"Ah, un.....though, earlier I felt, that Nanami-san's ability to empathize was really amazing but, looking at just now, Natsubayashi-san just sliced through it all, right. That's why, although I said *young girls*, it depends on the person, it seems like you can't really generalize like that, or something....."

"AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! It appeared!"

"....."

Nanami-san burst into laughter, while Natsubayashi-san discontentedly looked up at me.

"That's why, it's dangerous to draw your entire conclusion after only looking at a single sample, is kind of what I thought..."

"Enough, please, stop! Ahahaha!"

As always, bursting into laughter, Nanami-san. In the midst of that reverberating laughter, Natsubayashi-san, while ignoring it, looked in my direction and remarked,

".....That's"

"Eh?"

".....That's a *little* funny!"

WHAT IS!?

"Mimimi and Hanabi and.....*Tomozaki*? What are you getting all excited about?"

With our incoherent chatter, suddenly a voice that I remembered hearing somewhere before. I'd been so flustered, I had lost track of the passage of time. I hadn't even noticed the shadow approaching. Well, it would be them, wouldn't it. Someone that I was slightly afraid of. I should have wrapped things up before this happened.

Tomozaki, Natsubayashi, Nanami. The seating plan in Home Economics was ordered according to the attendance register. Which meant, in between Tomozaki and Natsubayashi.

—Nakamura.

"What is it, you guys? Getting all excited about something with Tomozaki?"

Seemingly grimacing with displeasure as he approached. From the same group as Nakamura, tagging along were two others, namely Mizusawa and... Takei, wasn't it. These two were the so-called Nakamura faction's fixed members, acting so as to solidify the flanks, with Nakamura placed at the centre. Mizusawa in particular was, rather than being simply a follower, more like an officer, the way he artfully conducted himself being something apparent even from my perspective.

"Ah, Nakamura, listen to this! Tomozaki's pretty funny~"

"Heeh.....*Tomozaki* is."

Fleetingly glancing in my direction. Smilingly. His eyes weren't laughing.

"So what's this about?]

A serpentine glint in his eyes. The sensation of my heart being gripped. Just what did Nakamura intend to do to me from here. A whole week had passed since the Atafami showdown. The strained atmosphere where everyone had been one way or another aware of the result had completely faded out, furthermore, at the moment, his followers were present. Nakamura would likely be able to come out in full force.

"Iyaa~, Tomozaki's being a variety show old man you see~"

"What, variety show old man?"

Nakamura said sullenly.

"Right, right."

"I don't get what that *means*, though."

Upon Nakamura saying this, to his side, Mizusawa, after surveying the surroundings with just his eyes, opened his mouth.

"Come on then, explain, Tomozaki!"

Possibly catching onto Nakamura's intention, throwing the question towards me on purpose. Singling out an individual in this kind of situation was detestable. Was the plan perhaps to make me talk about something at length,

during which I'd fumble my words or something? Was that how they were intending to toy with me? Don't underestimate me, though. It's just that I'm not a quick-witted communicator; I'm quite good at explanations. Also, compared to all of you, overwhelmingly strong at Atafami.

I explained the situation.

".....and that's basically it."

"Ahhaha. Yeah!"

Perhaps as might be expected from hearing my explanation a second time, Minami-san's reaction was weaker than before. As for Natsubayashi-san, she had been silent ever since Nakamura and the others had come. Was she shrinking away due to the arrival of three males from the riajuu group?

".....Uhh, and?"

So said Nakamura to me after I had finished my story.

"Eh?"

"Uh, ah, was that the end?"

"It was....."

"Wasn't funny at *all*,"

Saying so, Nakamura lobbed a *Right?* at his two followers.

"Un, it really wasn't....."

"Ah hah hah ha ! "

Putting on a serious face, Takei followed Nakamura's lead, and seeing that, Mizusawa gave a well-projected laugh.

"Ehh—! You three have a weird sense of humour huhh."

"Nah, we're just the usual, the weird one's actually Mimimi right?"

"Ehhh—! Nakamuu's cruel!"

With that, everyone except myself and Natsubayashi-san laughed loudly. An uncomfortable situation. It was thanks to Nanami-san's comical facial expression and tone of voice that the balance was just about being preserved,

that kind of impression.

"Then.....how about majority rules?"

This was proposed by Mizusawa.

"Ahh, that sounds great."

The impression of a general accompanied by their tactician.

".....Doesn't this strongly smell of a rigged game?"

Nanami-san said, laughingly.

"Okaay! Then, the people who think Mimimi was being weird!"

Acting on the spur of the moment, Takei called for the vote. Nakamura, Takei, and Mizusawa raised their hands.

"Ahahaha! Oi!"

Interjecting with a lively tsukkomi, Nanami-san. An impression of effort that could bear no fruit was also there but, if not for the presence of this comicality, it would have seemed like being on the verge of suffocation.

"Ahhh, looks like we have a majority then!"

To which, Mizusawa said in jest.

"Well, there's also the right to abandon one's vote, so it's still too early to tell, you know?"

.....A strange game had begun. Just what should I do here? Firstly, this majority-rules kind of peculiar game was something I was reluctant to get on board with. One might consider it something on the level of *It's not bullying, it's playing around, you know*, but I wasn't good at dealing with such things.

Additionally, Natsubayashi-san had even been giving a sullen look since a while ago. The manner in which she was shrinking away didn't seem like it was going to be straightened out anytime soon. Just what was the human relations situation here?

"Aa mou! Nakamuu's got the face of someone who already knows the outcome, doesn't he!"

"Right, then, those who think Shuuji's the weird one!"

bishi! With that lively comicality, Nanami-san immediately raised her hand. Natsubayashi-san was as before, still keeping her head down, completely ignoring the situation. As expected, it didn't seem like it would be a trivial matter. I looked on at their expressions, while wondering just what was currently taking place. What the heck is this? How should I be proceeding?

In my own way, taking into account my much too shallow experience with human relationships, I pondered.

.....First of all, should a hand not be raised here, it would most certainly become a matter of, *Why didn't you cast your vote for either of them?* Additionally, considering her behaviour up until now, it seemed very probable that Natsubayashi-san, even if told that, would continue to ignore things. Which meant, regardless of whether or not I raised my hand here, with a "Why didn't you raise your hand~?", it was certain that Natsubayashi-san would then become the target of being messed with.

In other words, if I were to raise my hand here, then Natsubayashi-san would be alone in her actions. If I too were to *not* raise it, then the target would become *two* people. And, I would likely bear the brunt of the attacks. With that being the case, the best plan might be to also not raise my hand? Un, let's do that. Not raising it.

Actually, in the first place, *what* is going on right now? Why did Natsubayashi-san become like this? How is Nanami-san able to laugh like that in this kind of situation? Is she not aware of the current situation? Or else, is it actually not that big of a deal, and am I just overreacting way too much? Aah, I've really had enough! Aren't group conversations way too difficult?!

"O—kayy! One vote from me too on this side~"

—At that point, what I unexpectedly heard coming from behind my back, was a cheerful, amiable voice.

No, a wastefully cheerful, wastefully amiable, *produced* voice.

"Aoi hasn't even heard what's going on right now, though?"

So said Nakamura, in a cheerful yet overbearing tone.

"Ehh—. I've been listening from behind this whole time, though, so isn't it fine?"

"No way. Since this matter only concerns Group 4. Outsiders can scram."

Nakamura, with a *shoo, shoo!*, brushed Hinami off.

"What's with that—. Even though you lost to Tomozaki-kun in Atafami~"

—The atmosphere froze over.

Hinami had bluntly said those words in a *Now, now, calm down* tone of voice. The somewhat taboo subject that nobody in the class would dare to touch on. Ever since Nakamura had merged into this location, everyone had for some reason or another been attentively watching the condition of this group, so it had been such that those words had reached all of those present. *Eh? Is it really okay to say that?* That was the kind of atmosphere it had now become. Even the smile of the always-laughing-with-an-*ahaha*— Nanami-san had visibly twitched for a moment.

"Hey. Aoi"

"To be carrying out something like a majority rules attack just because you're frustrated is so petty, you know~! Could it be because of that sort of thing that that you got rejected by Shimano-senpai?! *As expected, younger ones have no reliability huh.....* something like that!"

At the point of mentioning the senpai's lines, Hinami altered her tone of voice splendidly while using gestures to act the part.

"You.....tch, shut up."

"Ahahahahaha! That sounded just like her!"

"Buhaha!"

"Hahahahaha!"

It wasn't just Nanami-san, but also Takei and Mizusawa who laughed. The onlooking classmates too were trying to stifle their laughter.

Simply incredible.

"O—kayy, so with Mimimi and myself that now makes two votes, huh. After

that, there's—?"

Hinami glanced at me.I see, so that's it.

"I'm also voting for this side."

"There we go."

"Oi nobody was asking you!"

A somewhat frustrated but still cheerful heckling from Nakamura. This was now already Hinami's atmosphere. Which meant that, next.

"Come on."

In a whisper, while looking in Natsubayashi-san's direction.

"....."

Natsubayashi-san silently raised her hand.

"Right, four votes! So the one with the weird sense of humour is Shuuji, then!"

"Good fight, Nakamuu ! "

Some friendly teasing from Hinami and Nanami-san.

"If the majority says so I guess it can't be helped huh."

So said Nakamura in a joking tone of voice as he knitted his eyebrows.

"Then, I'll be waiting for the revenge match, okay! And for your Atafami revenge match against Tomozaki-kun too!"

At those words, the entire classroom laughed out loud. What *is* this. A taboo had become joke material in a single go. What *IS* this.

"*Alright*, I get it! You'd better wait for it, Tomozaki."

With a staged expression and manner of talking, he looked in my direction. Just like that, our eyes firmly met, upon which it was frighteningly visible to me that he was *really* angry. Just as I thought, making eye contact with someone wasn't something I was very good at.

"Y, yeah, just as I was hoping for."

It was at around that point that the Home Economics teacher turned up. Perfect timing.

Could it be, everything up to this point had been calculated.....nah, there's no way that could be true.

—

"Thanks for earlier, Aoi~ ! That was so cool of you!"

"Ahaha, thanks, Hanabi."

After the end of lessons, no sooner than Nakamura had exited the classroom, Natsubayashi-san rushed over to Hinami and embraced her.

"I was about to ruin the mood again."

"As I thought. It was clearly showing on Hanabi's face, after all."

As she said so, Hinami *yoshiyoshi*'d the clinging Natsubayashi-san. Simply looking on at this scene, one might have found it pleasant but, the phrase *about to ruin the mood again* had some deeper meaning to it. At this point, Nanami-san, as if imitating Natsubayashi-san, *also* rushed over energetically, while saying "Tama also worked hard~ ! You really hung in there!" or something of the sort.

Then, approaching from behind, inclusive of Hinami, she embraced Natsubayashi-san.

Natsubayashi-san embracing Hinami, and then from behind, Nanami-san embracing Natsubayashi-san. An adorable maiden snugly caught in between two beauties, this situation was undoubtedly a so-called blossoming JK-sandwich.

"Hey! Don't go around clinging to people as you please!"

Natsubayashi-san, persistent to the end, was saying this in a way not unlike an authoritative onlooker dishing out a warning from the side, but Nanami-san paid her no heed.

"So admirable~ ! Befitting of my praise!"

Saying so, Nanami-san *washiwashi*'d Natsubayashi-san's head with both

hands, and when those hands were firmly brushed away, in the same flow of things, lifted Natsubayashi-san's hair on one side and, well, proceeded to, with her lips, nip her in the ear with a **mu-**.

"Hia!?"

Seeing that reaction, Nanami-san grinned delightedly in satisfaction, and a pale, long and narrow finger, starting from the base of the neck opposite the ear currently being *hamuhamu'd*, began to **tsu tsu tsu—**, trace its way upwards. Perhaps timing the action to coincide with when Natsubayashi-san's body would with a start, tremble, at the same time, she stuck out her tongue to give the ear a lick. Natsubayashi-san's shivering further accelerated in a big way.

"Hey, Minmi.....! That's.....*aa!* *Don't.....li...aah!*"

Seemingly unable to endure it any longer, Natsubayashi-san let her voice leak out, all the while tightly gripping Hinami in an embrace. Nanami-san, with half-open eyes, flushed cheeks and a vacant expression on her face, let her emotions show as she sighed a long, warm, *haa~*.

"Come on Mimimi, you're overdoing it."

Hinami, in an exasperated tone, softly tapped her on the head. Nanami-san, with the same vacant expression as before, turned her eyes towards Hinami. Then, with a loose grin, she laughed. Hinami tried to lightly back away, but on account of her still being embraced by Natsubayashi-san, she was unable to withdraw a sufficient distance. Perhaps having sensed this, Natsubayashi-san separated herself from Hinami, but by that time it was too late, for she was already within striking range of Nanami-san's attacks.

"*Fuuhn.....?* Should Aoi really be saying such a thing—?"

Still in the same cheerful manner of speech that she had been using earlier but, somewhere there was now a roguish, mature atmosphere about it.

"Ei."

"Nhaa!?"

Nanami-san had started to lightly poke at Hinami's right side. Hinami, in a way that would have been unimaginable based on her state up until now,

inadvertently let out a coquettish voice. Without pausing, Nanami-san, as if walking her index finger and middle finger, began *tsun, tsun, tsun*, poking Hinami's side with them in turn, making her way up towards the armpit. Moving her hand in a slow, teasing fashion.

"Aoi's weak around this part, right?"

"H.....eey! Mimimi...!"

Unable to take it, Hinami withdrew both arms to her sides, and drove away the walking hand that approached. Thereupon, Nanami-san, as if exploiting the opening, detached herself from Natsubayashi-san, and smoothly circled round to Hinami's back. Then she took her right hand and placed it around Hinami's waist, and through the gap created by her shirt, thrust her hand into Hinami's left flank. As my awareness increased, I realized that her left hand was also now gently gripping Hinami's chin, the index finger touching her lips. Simultaneously, with that left elbow, depriving Hinami's left arm of any movement. Just what is this technique.

"Eh, what was that? Did you say something? Aoi~?"

Nanami-san temporarily halted her movements, and whispered this at a distance close enough for her breath to reach Hinami's cheek.

"Like I *said*, sto, *hyahh*!?"

At the same time that Hinami had begun to talk, Nanami-san's right hand that was in direct contact with her side began to rotate, as if drawing a circle. Due to this happening at the critical juncture at which she was starting her sentence, Hinami involuntarily let out a loud cry. Myself included, all the non-*ikeing* males stared at this scene while feigning expressionlessness.

"*Hmmm*? Say that one more time, please?"

"Knock it.....off....." As Hinami said this, she bent her unimpeded right arm at the elbow, positioning it slightly forward. This was likely *that*. The preliminary movement for an elbow strike.

"Ei ≡"

"Nn!?"

The left hand that had been caressing her lips, had, without giving anyone time to process the action, suddenly been inserted under Hinami's right armpit, as if holding her tight. On registering this, Hinami tightly drew her arm back in, rendering the elbow strike a failure. Then, Nanami-san, from the neck, circled her head around to the front, and to the extent of *They're going to kiss, aren't they?*, drew close to Hinami's face, uttering "Too bad≡" in apparent satisfaction. An immoral smile.Upon which, whatever her thoughts, Hinami too turned her face towards Nanami-san. Then, their eyes met. Their pupils, moist. Eh, what is this what is going on.

Just like that, Hinami approached Nanami-san's lips with her own. Eh? *Seriously?* Then, at a distance so close that it was unclear as to whether they were touching or not, Hinami separated her lips the slightest amount. Nanami-san, as if reciprocating, slowly separated her own lips. They drew closer. And then.

Fuu—.

"Fuua!?"

Hinami had, with great vigor, breathed into Nanami-san's mouth. Unable to withstand the surprise attack, Nanami-san undid her bind, immediately retreating several steps backward. While pressing the ball of her finger against her lips, Nanami-san looked in Hinami's direction with a frustrated, fun smile. Her cheeks were red.

".....U—n、as expected I'm no match for Aoi, huh..."

Hinami had an exasperated expression. Then, in a slightly childish manner, she spoke.

"Really, Mimimi's such a baka! Giving up after that?"^[11]

"U—n、rather than giving up....."She turned her moistened eyes upwards."I won't lose the next one, or something?"

Saying so, Nanami-san stuck out her tongue jokingly. Then with a **kyapi~**, she winked.

"Hey! *Or something?* Not! That's the end of the sexual harassment!"

So declared Natsubayashi-san, her finger snapping upwards as she pointed at Nanami-san.

"Ahhaha. As emotionally attached to Aoi as always, I see."

"That's not what it's about!" Then she averted her eyes. ".....Thanks for earlier too, Minmi."

Natsubayashi-san had suddenly switched to a serious tone of voice. Her eyes, straightforward.

".....For what—? I didn't do anything, you know～"

"Seriously! There's no need for that! That's enough, receive the gratitude quietly!"

"Ehhh? Tama says some difficult things once in a while, huh. ^[12]Ah! Exactly because she's Tama!"

Nanami-san was playing around, but it seemed that as expected this was a conversation with deeper meaning. *Thanks* was probably referring to earlier when Nanami-san had conducted herself in a bright, enjoyable way the whole time. Assuming this to be the case, she had certainly been a great help.

Perhaps because the yuri paradise-like spectacle ^[13] had come to an end, the spectating males were gradually dispersing. For an additional moment, I was considering also blending in with the ones leaving, but upon reconsideration, decided to walk to where the three of them were. After all, I was a member of the concerned party, Hinami being there made things slightly easier, and above all else, it seemed that heading in that direction would bring me closer to the objective.

"Ah—, Hinami.....-san, thanks for earlier. That really helped me out."

Hinami received my words with a natural smile that I couldn't think of as business-like in the least. Split personality?

"It's totally fine! Rather than that, Tomozaki-kun, you're unexpectedly amusing, aren't you. I mean, I was listening in from behind while laughing."

In a girlish tone of voice, she seemed about to break into laughter.

"No, no, I was just saying exactly what I was thinking, though....."

"Seems that way, huh."

"AHAHAHAHAHA! You're still saying it!"

Next to the smiling Hinami, Nanami-san was roaring with laughter.

"Nanami-san's laughing too much."

"Ah, sorry sorry.....rather, just Mimimi is fine, you know!"

"Uhh....."

"*Nanami-san*, is already pretty much something only teachers use to call her, you see!"

Hinami. Pointing that out, meant it was *probably* an *order*, that. Well, whatever. Better than calling her by her given name without any honorifics.

"Ehhh alright, Mimimi it is."

"Let's get along, Tomozaki!"

"What about Hanabi?"

"Anything's fine, you know?"

"Then.....Tama?" This proposal came from Hinami.

"Aoi!?" Natsubayashi-san, with a surprised expression, faced Hinami.

"Ahahahaha! Sounds great! Tomozaki, looks like you and I are Tama-buddies now!"

"Uhh....., *Tama*? But why? Natsubayashi Hanabi, right?"

"You see, look, at a fireworks display you call out Ta—maya— or something, right. That's why! ^[14] Also, because it's cute, see!"

Nanami-sa.....Mimimi explained in high spirits.

"Right, right! Isn't *Tama* fine!"

"Aoi's betraying me too!?"

This too was an order, huh. The hurdle was a little high up but, well, better than calling her by her given name without honorifics.

"Uhhh, then, Tama...-chan?"

"Ahahahaha! If you say it like that, it's just like the name of a small animal!"

"Don't play around with people's names!"

"Uhhh, then.....?"

I was confused. Thereupon, Tama-chan, without giving it a moment's thought,

"It's fine? Calling me Tama-chan.I'm already used to it anyway."

It wasn't a disagreeable expression. Rather, a straightforward facial expression that didn't match the situation at hand. It was a strange feeling to see such an expression present in this slightly humorous atmosphere, but, well, at any rate, she didn't seem to be lying.

".....Then, uhhh, Tama-chan it is.Let's get along."

"There's no need to say that to each of us individually!"

"Hahaha." What a strange child.

Afterwards, I somehow managed to survive entering the conversation between this group of four people, during the one or two minutes spent moving back to the classroom. ^[15] Well, it was completely by way of being pulled by Hinami into the discussion, though. Incidentally, it seemed that the reason for 'Minmi' was simply to do with 'Mimimi' being difficult to say.

—In this way, in a way relatively more turbulent than I had imagined, the first day had come to a close.

After school, I waited at the second Sewing Room, and before long Hinami turned up.

".....Ou."

"Hello. Well then, without any delay, let's begin."

"Y-yeah."

It had begun with a more solemn feeling than expected, so I was slightly nervous.

".....Firstly, congratulations on your successful completion of the mission."

I was thanked for my efforts.

"Th-Thanks."

"Well, in actuality, there's a problem along the lines of if you were the one who initiated the conversation or if it was the other side that initiated the conversation but, on account of you ending up speaking to *four* people, one more person than the quota of three, I'll overlook it."

"Ahh, that's good to hear, that part was making me anxious."

It didn't mean that I had in actuality initiated a conversation with three out of those four people, though.

"So, how was it? Your impression after trying it out."

"Impression?"

"Anything's fine really, what's the thing that left the biggest impression?"

"There were way too many of those....."I racked my brains."But, well, the the thing that left the biggest impression was.....probably the Home Economics Room's..... ATAFAMI incident."

"ATAFAMI incident?"

"I mean, in front of everyone who was watching, didn't you mention Nakamura losing in ATAFAMI?"

"Ahh, so that's it."Hinami smiled wryly.

"In addition, you even made them laugh. That was surprising."

"Well, this is a review meeting so, I'd like to talk about the actions *you* carried out rather than mine."

"Ah, that's true, isn't it."

"It's fine. That was going to be necessary at some point, you see."

"Necessary?"

"Yes. It was clear that Nakamura was holding a considerable grudge after losing to you. Rather than not wanting it to be touched upon, or it being a dark history.....you very much beat him up, didn't you?"

"Well.....leaving no part of him unscathed."

"As I thought." Another wry smile.

"Was that problematic?"

"Not particularly problematic. Just, the matter was left alone by those surrounding him, and, not having it touched on was what was problematic. Because of that, the frustration of losing, or the unpleasant atmosphere in which nobody in school would approach the subject, those kinds of feelings with no place to go, without any way of being vented, were accumulating inside of Nakamura."

"So *that's* how it is."

"Yes. Then, as more time passed, more and more of those feelings accumulated, like a swelling balloon being filled to bursting. That's why, it became even more difficult to touch it. Well, that's just how I see it."

"I see."

"Were that to continue to happen, Nakamura would steadily become more and more bitter towards you, and it would become more and more difficult to deflate that balloon. Nakamura is a central figure in the class, so him being bitter towards you would not be good for the stability of your position. As you've set your sights on becoming a riajuu, that wouldn't be any good, right. That's why, there was the necessity to point a needle at that balloon, and make the explosion occur as fast as possible."

"Explosion."

"Yes. To with a tiny prick, in front of everyone, make it just a laughing matter, you see."

Make it a laughing matter.That was putting it quite simply.

"That kind of thing isn't easy to do, though."

"Yes. That's true. Well, from a practical standpoint doing that much isn't a very big deal but, probably anyone that wasn't me wouldn't have been able to do it."

"I-I see....." Phew, this person is a *little* scary.

"Anyway, that's what I've done this time around. Nakamura's behaviour should mellow a little, I think."

Incredibly, it was only after considering all these factors that she had undertaken that conspicuous action.

"Anyway, returning the conversation to the main subject at hand. Today, of all the actions you yourself performed, what left the biggest impression?"

My own, huh.

"Uhh, the lack of effectiveness of my degree of quick-wittedness, perhaps."

"By quick-wittedness, what do you mean?"

"How should I say this? To say something clever in order to liven up the mood, something like that."

"I see..... Though, in the Home Economics Room, things seemed to be getting pretty heated up. I was slightly surprised."

"Ahh.....that's a different matter."

"Different?"

"That was simply, me voicing out the thoughts in my head exactly as they were, and them being unexpectedly well-received. That's why, it didn't feel like, *communication*, or anything of the sort."

"Saying exactly what you're thinking, isn't that communication?"

A surmising gaze.

"Hm."

"You're mistaken about one thing."

"Eh?"

"Do you get it? The thing called a *conversation* is, by nature, exchanging with the other party, 'The thoughts inside one's head', you see."

"Eh, isn't that..... something like simply imposing one's ego on the other person?"

Both sides mutually respecting the other side's view, being empathic of each

other, isn't that what a conversation is? Just like in Mimimi's case.

"That is incorrect. You might think that taking a scoop out of the other party's thoughts, and with it then doing things like sympathizing or empathizing consists a conversation but, that isn't what the essence of a conversation is."

Just as this person was saying, I had certainly been of the impression that sympathy and empathy made up a conversation.

I mean, the adults of society, or even classmates and so on, that was what they were all doing. At the very least, that was how I saw it. So, since I wasn't good with such things, it was suffocating regardless of where I was.

"That's incorrect?"

"It's incorrect. Well, for sure, simply ignoring what the other party is saying and unconcernedly presenting one's own thoughts would simply be egoistic, though. However, that's not how it was this time around, was it?"

Uhhhhmm?

"Is that true?"

"Yes. This is how you explained things. On listening to Mimimi's words, 'The ability of young girls these days to empathize is amazing', you thought. That's why you conveyed that. Correct? Which means, you were properly accepting the words of the other person, and saying exactly what you thought about it to them. That being the case, it wasn't egoistic."

"Well.....I guess?"

"Certainly, it is true that in many cases there is initially only sympathy and empathy, making for a harmonious situation. But you know. A human being's intuition is surprisingly sharp. That kind of person will eventually be seen through. Therefore, when looking to the long-term, by the end, those in whom trust will be placed are the people who, listen to what the other person says, for the time being do not *sympathize*, but rather first think over it by themselves, and *then* convey the answer that emerges, *exactly* as it is. And that is what you were able to do. There are also a lot of people who are troubled over not being able to do precisely that, you know."

"I, see."

I was hovering on the border between understanding and not understanding.

"That's why, your putting things into practice this time around, in relation to that section was, considering it was a first time, a huge success."

Seriously? To be told so far as the words *huge success*, I couldn't help but be happy.

"But, in relation to the other sections it was a no-no. Nothing good about them. The incident with Kikuchi-san was the *worst*. To lend out tissues after being requested to, and upon lending them out, find you laughing underneath the mask, not to mention, without you making an attempt to hide it, to be shown the state of yourself blowing your nose, that was piling another worst case on top of the worst of the worst. Sinking to the bottom of the earth wouldn't be enough to hide it."

"Hinami-san.....you're putting too much strength into the stick of your carrot and stick approach....."[16]

"What are you saying, I'm not done yet. In the Home Economics Room, you started up a conversation when I wasn't there yet. I said so, didn't I? That it needs to be done at a time when I'm around."

"No, that was....."

"Understand? This time around you were saved because when Nakamura barged in, I was already around, but, had the sequence of events been reversed, do you know how things would have turned out? Hanabi might have gotten angry, and you might have been made the subject of some kind of show. If that had happened, the goal would have receded into the distance, you know?"

"S-Sorry.Wait. Which means, in other words, the rule for me do to it only when Hinami is around was, so that I could be helped out at the critical moment?"

"Of course. If it I just to know whether or not you were doing it properly, I could just confirm it with the girl in question or something, that method also exists."

"Hi-Hinami....."

So kind.....

"Hey, you didn't by any chance, think that I was worried about you or something, did you? I decided that I'd do my best to achieve the goal, so I'd only be troubled if my effort was wasted on something like that, you know?"

"Ah, right, of course that'd be the case."

"Besides, it wasn't just to be able to help you. At the times when you approached them to talk, the girl's first reaction, the mood of the conversation from there, and your conversation technique. It was after properly observing those things that I wanted to decide the course from here on out. With whom to proceed in getting closer to, or what kind of practice to do."

"Y-You were thinking things through that far?"

"Isn't that obvious? When challenging a boss, if you were to face them without confirming whether or not their ability is suitable for your own level, there's no way you would be able to win, right?"

"That's....."Speaking from the bottom of my heart."Exactly how it is."

.....Really, once it becomes a conversation about gaming, we completely get along no matter what.

"Well then. So, about the course from this point forward.....could you please try removing your mask for a moment."

"Hn, okay."I removed it as told. A full smile was brought to light.

"Now, try returning to your normal face."

I returned to it as instructed.

"Un, I see, you've certainly been doing it constantly, haven't you."

"Eh?"

"Here, *now* do you understand?"

"Ah—"

I was astonished for a moment upon having the hand mirror thrust at me. The

intention had been to return to my normal state but, compared to the last time I'd had the hand mirror thrust at me, the shape of my mouth was definitely, how should I say this, tighter.

"Slightly different from that time, right. Seems like you've been doing it properly, how admirable."

"Ahh, well, I *was* told to do it constantly, after all."

"Un.....with this there shouldn't be any problems. From now on, it's fine if you don't do it all the time. When you're talking to people, or when you get tired, it's alright if you want to relax your expression. You also don't have to wear the mask in public. Just, you are to check the shape of your mouth with a mirror once in a while, remember the way you applied strength to naturally tighten your mouth, and continuously work towards achieving that state. Once doing that unconsciously becomes possible, this training will be over."

"Ohh, really! Understood!"

Despite all appearances, I might be making progress. Yosh, let's do this every day.

".....and, that's the end. Is there anything else you have on your mind?"

"Let me see.....about the incident to do with Natsubayashi-sa.....Tama-chan.....how should I say this, her condition at that time."

".....Ahh、 well, you see." Hinami switched over to a difficult expression.

"Ah, if it's difficult to speak about then it's okay to not sa—"

"That girl is, rather than being very *stubborn*.....more precisely, quite *upfront*, wouldn't you say?"

Cutting me off, still wearing a difficult expression, Hinami continued her words.

"*At the moment the mood is like this, therefore...* — she doesn't follow that kind of thing. Just doing what she thinks."

"Heeh.That's rare for girls these days."

"Right. That's why that part of her is liked by her close friends. I like it a lot

too, but it would appear that there are also those who can't agree with that part of her."

"Well, I guess so."After all, she didn't seem to behave very much like how a typical young girl these days would.

"So, she has a particularly low affinity with people like Nakamura, who influence the mood of a situation, and are the type to communicate with people."

Ahh.

"I see. That does sound like it'd be the case."

"That's why, a few times some minor.....disputes arose. It appears that those incidents became sort of traumatic to Hanabi herself, even making her feeling responsible. However, conversely, Nakamura, being Nakamura, seems to have a part of him that is trying to somehow get that stubborn Hanabi to conform just once. It's something resembling pride or some other kind of disposition, so he doesn't mean anything bad by it.That's just how I think of it, though."

"Ahh, but assuming that to be the case.....it's quite troublesome, huh."

Upon me saying this,

"You're quite right! If it's at a time that I'm around, then just like today something can be worked out somehow, but if the other party is Nakamura, it's difficult for someone other than myself. It's possible for Hanabi to get traumatized again at a time I'm not watching. However, there's no way that I can be around Hanabi all the time, is there?That's why, it's difficult."

Hanami said this in a tone unusual for her, in which her emotions seemed to intermittently show and then be concealed.

".....Even for you, there's some things you can't do anything about, huh. I thought you could do anything."

When I casually said this to her, Hinami, with a somewhat gloomy face that I had seen before at some point, said, "I, can't do anything."

"Eh?"

".....is along the lines of what you thought I would say, correct? There's

nothing I can't do. Someday, I'll also resolve the matter concerning Hanabi."

"I-Is that so?"

Hinami returned to her usual expression brimming with confidence.A joke? What a waste of acting talent.

"But, even if someone were to tell her to try to please people, I don't think she would listen..... T-Tama-chan, I mean."

"That's true.Besides, I wouldn't want that girl to do such a thing. It's rare to find someone able to bare their thoughts exactly as they are in words."

"Well, that kind of person *is* hard to come by, huh."

"Precisely because Hanabi, at any time, says exactly what she thinks, the defenses around her heart are weak. Therefore, if there isn't anyone around to become her shield, or to divert the attacking spearheads that come flying towards her, then her spirit quickly becomes exhausted.Well, that's basically how it is in terms of Hanabi."

"So that's how it is."

When I nodded in admiration, Hinami continued, "That's why, unexpectedly, she might be highly compatible with you."

"Eh? Is that so? Why?"

".....Well, whatever. For the time being, tonight, please reflect in your own way about what happened today, or what you have learned. If you're only following instructions, then the speed of growth will be slow, after all. I'll need your assent. Is that fine?"

"Hn, yeah, I understand."

"Then, shall we leave it at that for today?"

Alright. On hearing those words of affirmation from me, Hinami directed me to leave the second Sewing Room. Meaning that after a suitable time delay, she too would start to make her way back. Without any objections, I headed back.....then realized something.

In this kind of situation, wouldn't it have been better to adopt the ladies-first-

approach? From the standpoint of a riajuu. I still had a long way to go.

Translator Notes:

[1] バチッ? Well an equivalent might be *crackle*.

[2] I've explained this before somewhere in Chapter 1, but gokuri=gulping noise.

[3] Original: 実践編 (jissen-hen). I'd interpret this as being the part of the so-called "walkthrough" where you start using the skills you've built up, in an actual setting. No better wording comes to mind for now.

[4] Hopefully you're already used to this kind of thing. You see, in Japanese culture (in fact, even in numerous other Asian ones), it's quite common (and more polite) to refer to someone by their name in the conversation rather than using an equivalent of "you". For now I've decided on preserving this convention, at the risk of it sounding unnatural in English.

[5] Original is イケてるグループ. Cool-kid group? With-it group? Anyway you'd best assimilate this concept of *ike* status (think of it as similar to the *ike* in the oft-mentioned *ikemen*), since I'm not so good with translations of these kind of terms.

[6] Well, the original is of course ビッチ but I understand the Japanese connotation behind this loanword is different from the English one.

[7] I don't know if it's just me, but it seems kind of darkish blue in the illustrations. The original is 黒い長い髪, could it be there's some fiendish trickery going on like how sometimes blue means green in Japanese!? ... Anyway, never trust a colour LN illustration.

[8] Original is *plus alpha* in katakana – プラスアルファ. Basically some unknown variable thrown in the mix.

[9] ワシャワシャ: Snuggled, cuddled, you get the picture.

[10] The original is 一五〇アンダー (One character appears censored with a 〇). Probably referring to the class of heights under 150cm. Incidentally it seems there's a whole clothing line in Japan dedicated to this.

[11] You know what this means, and I'm neither translating it nor explaining it, baka.

[12] There was probably a pun here which is difficult to carry over to English, the original is たまはたまに難しいこと言うなあ, and *Tama ni* (たまに) means once in a while.

[13] Either you know what it means, or you don't, or you know what it means and came here because of *those* illustrations.

[14] Okay so I had to do a bit of digging to figure this one out. But in short some story from the Edo period, some fireworks contest with something to do with the Sumida River (隅田川) led to people associating Hanabi (Fireworks – 花火) with Tamaya (Jeweler – 玉屋) as well as Kagiya (Locksmith – 鍵屋) and then there's these "よ、たまや～、よ、かぎや～" calls and whatnot and well, ask a Japanese friend or something.

[15] The previous scene was at the Home Economics classroom, so this probably meant moving back to their homeroom for the next lesson.

[16] The original Japanese saying is 飴と鞭. But carrot and stick is a pretty accurate translation.

PART 2

Before going to sleep, on top of my bed. I had been told to think about it in my own way, but from just which part should I be thinking? Honestly, I was overwhelmingly lacking in experience in anything connected to the thing called human relations, and if told to analyse anything from today's experience that Hinami hadn't already covered, I would be helpless to do anything except tuck my tail and run. At any rate, what I had noticed this time was that, in the battlefield called a group, the invisible monster called atmosphere was constantly throwing its weight around in a manner more significant than I had expected. But, as to how to best fight that aforementioned atmosphere, I didn't have the slightest idea, and in the first place, I didn't even know if it was appropriate to call it a *fight*. What I *did* know was that, those who were skilful in taming that invisible monster, beast tamers like Hinami or Nakamura, *those* people controlled the battlefield known as a group. In a circular Colosseum,

Hinami and Nakamura faced off, equipped with their specialty weapons, dodging the huge and irregularly shaped monster in the middle as they inflicted damage on the other. For Nakamura, a whip, for Hinami, a mantle. That was the kind of picture that came to mind. They wouldn't be making direct contact. To the very end, they would be making the atmosphere do the killing. Was I able to do battle in that sort of place? At the very least, such an image didn't spring forth. That day, it was while processing my thoughts in such a manner that I fell asleep.

—Incidentally, in the friend battle that had begun after the zero-emotion'19:00, 5 Rounds'mail received from Hinami, it was with five consecutive wins of mine that I had lowered the curtain. It was still too early for her to take me on.

Chapter 3: The huge EXP gain from hunting solo is surprising

PART 1

"Starting from today, we'll be correcting your posture as well."

It was from there that Hinami's instruction the following morning began.

"Posture."

"Yes, posture. Do you remember? What's important for a good impression is, facial expression, physique and posture, I said."

"Yeah, I remember."

Hinami *had* been saying that when we had talked in her room.

"If you can somehow manage those three, then that will be the foundations covered. Your physique is, well, pretty average, so if you just fix your facial expression and posture, you'll get a passing mark. You're more or less doing something about your facial expression with the mask training, so all that's left is the posture."

The goal was surprisingly nearby.

"But what should I do about my posture? I mean, in the first place, is my posture really that bad?"

"Well, it *is* bad, but.....rather than that, the postures of people in today's world are generally not that good."

"Ah, is that so? Then among those people, the ones with a good posture will be able to stand out, you mean?"

"Well, that's half-right and half-wrong, I'd say."

"Half?"

"There are various *kinds* of bad posture too."

While saying this, Hinami started walking with her knees bent outwards, her head bent upwards and her shoulders swinging widely.

"This is also a kind of bad posture, but as you can see it carries an air of intimidation. It's not the best, but it's on the riajuu side of things."

"Feels powerful, kind of like a delinquent."

"Yes. And this is....."

This time, she started walking with her back hunched, her face looking down and her shoulders tucked inwards.

"This too is a bad posture. However, this one gives a weak impression."

"Ahh— . Certainly gives off the feeling of an otaku or introvert."

It looked like someone who would be bad at sports. So changing posture can give *quite* a different impression, huh. And she was good at demonstrating just that.

"In other words, while it is true that most people don't have good postures, hiriajuu will often have postures that look even weaker."

"Is that so? Why's that?"

"Let me see. I can think of various reasons for that. Hiriiajuu use computers or gaming machines frequently, making them more prone to getting that posture, for one."

"I see."

"However, that's not the biggest reason. It's an issue of mind and body."

"Mind and body?"

"As a test, can you try the Ahem pose? Stick your chest out and put both hands on your hips."^[1]

"L-Like this?"

I showed a dignified pose.

".....How is it? Just by changing your posture, don't you feel a bit more powerful?"

".....You're right."It was true that upon sticking my chest out and doing the Ahem pose, I felt a little bit more confident, or rather, I strongly felt like I could proceed as myself. ".....but, couldn't I be feeling this way because you *told* me so? "

"Well, that is partially the case. However, the mind and body are closely connected. For example, when you get nervous, you cross your arms, and when you feel relaxed, you open your legs and loosen your shoulders. Conversely, when you feel sad, if you try to smile, even if only on the outside, you will also feel less sad in reality. Isn't that a famous saying? "

"Ah, well, they do say that."

"If you strengthen your body then your mind will be strengthened too. On the other hand, if your mind is weak then your body also gets weakened. So it's not like one leads to the other, but rather that they operate as a set. So, for riajuu, because their minds are set to being riajuu, their bodies become riajuu-like too."

"So it's like that."

"But, like I said....."As Hinami started her sentence, she started walking in a way that was slender and unintimidating, yet full of confidence with an adult-like aura.

"You don't necessarily need a posture as good as this one. Or rather, it's not something you can do in one day since you will need a long time to correct things like the distortion of your pelvis or your muscles' habits. However, you don't have the free time to do that. Nor is it essential."

Amazing. This person really *can* do anything.

"So, what should I do?"

"You just need to stop giving off that weak atmosphere."

Hinami pointed her finger at the area around my chest.

".....How do I do that?"

"There's a simple way to fix this. Come here."

While saying"Huh?", I followed her instructions.

"Lean your back and shoulder on the wall. And, while keeping your heels together, spread your toes left and right."

I did exactly as she said.

"Do you get it? Right now, you're making use of your butt muscles."

"Hn? Ah, it's true. I really am."

Without my noticing it, I had automatically put quite a bit of strength into those muscles. While I was backed up against the wall and thinking this, Hinami began approaching me with a serious look. Eh? What? At extreme point blank range, suddenly there came the face of a refined girl. Due to the wall behind me, I was unable to step back. Was this high-class and clean fragrance the smell of shampoo? Then, Hinami slowly reached out her hands towards me, and,

"Un, this is good." While saying that, she felt my buttocks.

"Woaah!? W-w-what!?"

"Just checking. Can you not make a big fuss from simply getting your butt touched? Aren't you a man?"

"But! That's not the problem!"

Or rather, could you stop that? It's bad for my heart! Kind of getting overexcited for no reason here!

".....What's with that face? Anyway, it seems alright. Now while maintaining the strength in your butt muscles, return your toes and heels to normal. After that, keep your shoulders and hips on the wall. Keep your butt as it is."

She continued giving out instructions as if nothing had happened. I followed them hurriedly.

"I-Is this okay ? "

"Yes.Now do you get it? That you're more imposing than before."

.....I really was. Without me realizing it.

".....You're right."

"While maintaining that posture, step away from the wallwith this your posture shouldn't look so weak anymoreUn, seems about right."

So said Hinami after pulling a short distance away and assessing my entire body. Seriously?

"However, this is quite a chore, huh."

"That's true. It's because you're using muscles you don't normally use. However, from now on, whenever you stand, you are to always assume that posture. And if you can, even when sitting, throw your chest out and make use of your butt muscles. Generally speaking, people who have postures like you often don't stick out their chests and don't use their butt muscles. Therefore, make sure that it becomes a habit to stick out your chest and make use of your butt muscles."

"'Always' again?"

"Isn't that obvious? What you're doing is character creation. You're training your basic abilities. If you aren't able to keep it up all the time, it couldn't be called a basic ability, right?"

Well, that's certainly true.

"I got it. And, what I'll be doing today..... isn't only this, right?"

"Naturally. While doing that, there's also one more thing."

Of *course* she wouldn't be that lenient.

"What should I do?"

"This time it won't be that difficult. Today, several times, while you're with me, you just need to talk a few times to Mimimi, or Hanabi, or else any of the boys I'm on good terms with."

Just talking, huh. She said that rather easily, didn't she.

"Well, I guess that the fact that you'll be with me makes it easier than yesterday."

"That's right. Anyway, this will be your task for the rest of the week."

"Continuously doing this for four days?"

"Correct."

Quite a lot here. To take in.

"So, when doing that, what should I be learning?"

Without understanding that, the efficiency seemed pretty bad.

"Heeh, *aren't* you getting assertive. That's a good tendency to have. "

"Well thanks."

"Anyway, it's simple. It's to earn experience points."

"Earn experience points?"

"Yes. Look, isn't it common? In an RPG, during the prologue, there'd be the kind of event where you would befriend a really strong character, fighting strong enemies together. After that, the character leaves your party, but during the final stage, they turn out to be an important character, and join your party once again. By that time, the protagonists would have become as strong as that character. Then, you'd think to yourself, 'Ahh, how we've grown'."

This person always seems to be having fun whenever she talks about games.

"Ah, that does happen sometimes. There are also times where I wonder, *Why hasn't that character grown at all!* or something."

"That's exactly right!" Hinami responded in a joyful voice, then cleared her throat.".....Well, this is the same thing. Temporarily forming a party with me and fighting strong enemies. And making use of that to gain experience points."

"I see."

Levelling up with handicapped battles, huh. [2]

"And while you're at it, there's also information gathering to be done. Even in an RPG, after having fought a boss once, wouldn't you learn their behavioural patterns, and develop countermeasures for the next time you fight? Like their weak points, or the amount of damage they inflict. If you did that, next time you'd know how to attack and when best to use restoration items or techniques, right."

"That's true."

"What you're going to do is that kind of thing. By conversing, you'll see *and* learn the flow of an actual conversation."

Learn, huh. Given my current state, I felt like the conversation would just move along without me understanding a thing.

"Is it okay for me to just think about it in rough terms? Or is there anything I should be paying special attention to?"

Hinami thought for a short while.

"Let me see..... well then, in the four days from now, I think you'll talk to about ten people. It should be fine if you just perform some kind of analysis on those conversations."

"Analysis?" Actually, ten people is a pretty vast amount, isn't it.

"Yes. In your own way, think about the different skills required for having a conversation, such as how to carry on the conversation or get closer to the other person."

"I see..... analysis, huh?"

I wasn't sure if I *could* do it, but supposed I could try to.

"However.....I don't think I'd be very able to suddenly enter a conversation between people I'm not familiar with. Then what?"

"Ahh, in that case, it's okay not to."

"Eh ? "

"This time, the objective is observation, after all. Well, I'll make sure that it won't seem unnatural, so you can be at ease and just observe."

So leaving everything to her meant things would be okay.....something like that, probably.

"That's basically it. Anyway, I'll call you after school today, so find something to do like self-study and wait for me."

On asking Hinami "After school? What are we doing today?", she replied with the following as if it were only natural.

"I'll be gathering Mimimi, Hanabi, and a few of the guys to walk back to the train station. You'll be mixing in with them."

"Huh!?"

Not just talking for a while, but going home together straight away!?

Translator Notes:

[1] Ahem pose: Do an image search for えっへん ポーズ

[2] Original is ハンデ戦. This is probably just terminology for the method of levelling up that Hinami describes, *i.e.* fighting with a stronger player in your party to defeat opponents otherwise too strong for you. As a side note, be aware that a handicap can go both ways, positive *and* negative. This particular example is a positive handicap.

PART 2 – PART 5

"That's right. Mimimi, you didn't know?"

"I *really* didn't. Eh? You mean everyone else knew?"

"Un, I did."

"Well of course *Aoi* would know, right."

"I knew it too, ya know."

On the way home. Everybody was excitedly talking about the fact that the artists behind the extremely well done picture on the blackboard at the back were Matsumoto Daichi — who was actually part of the current group — and another boy by the name of Hashiguchi Kyouya. Naturally, I had been left out of the conversation. However.

"How about Tomozaki-kun?"

Just like this, Hinami would sometimes direct the topic towards me as necessary.

"Err, I've seen him draw a cat before, so I knew."

"Eh!? Even though *Tomozaki* knew, I didn't!?"

"That's rude! Ahaha."

And like this, it became the sort of pattern where whenever the conversation

drifted towards me a little, another person would begin talking. Whenever Hinami passed me the ball, in order to at the very least prevent it from coming to naught, I tried and tried to receive it and pass it on. It felt like, as long as the ball never fell to the ground, no matter how badly I passed it on, Hinami would be able to send it to the other side of the court in a single move.

Because of that, I was able to safely observe the conversation. Though, having said that, probably owing to me being a complete beginner, I wasn't really able to make any significant observations.

".....Righht? Anyway, I'm sooo tired."

"You've been tired since *yesterday*, Daichi."

"Ahh, I've been doing a bit of muscle training, you see."

"Ehh!?"

Next, when the boys talked about muscle training, Mimimi let out a surprised interjection. Really though, Mimimi was amazing. She could introduce new topics into the conversation, expand other people's topics, and laugh a lot, helping to create a lively mood. Girls like this are probably what they would call naturally cheerful people. I had to at least try to imitate her skills a little. Since I wasn't able to do anything like introduce a new topic into the conversation, I felt like I should at the very least attempt to expand on the topics of others.

"So, which part are you training?"

"Pretty much the whole body. The muscles in my arms, chest, stomach, back, and also my legs."

"Whoa."

"Ah, then"

I suddenly cut in. Thinking, if I were to join the conversation, then it was now or never! Hinami raised her eyebrows with a twitch and looked in my direction. Eh? Was that bad? However, it was too late to turn back now, so I had no choice but to take my chances.

"Are you training your butt muscles too?"

Butt? Such was the atmosphere that enveloped everyone.

* * *

"I'm really sorry about yesterday!"

The next morning. In the second Sewing Room. I immediately apologized the moment I was able to make out Hinami's figure.

".....Is this about the butt muscle incident?"

"Yes! Really, I'm so sorry I went and did something on my own and created a weird atmosphere!"

I continued to offer my heartfelt apologies while thinking about how dreadful a case 'The butt muscle incident' was.

Following my question, I had been asked by a puzzled Matsumoto Daichi, "Eh? It's possible to train your butt muscles?", and a "Eh? What was that, a gag? What?" kind of atmosphere had circulated. ^[1] However, Hinami saved the situation by indifferently saying "Ah, I'm training it, my butt muscles" and the conversation changed to something like "The secret of Aoi's nice body is training her butt muscles!?". After that, I had stayed quiet.

"In the end, because I went and did that....."

"You don't have to say the same thing so many times. It's not something I particularly care about."

"Eh?"

"It was the result of you putting in the effort to think and act yourself, right? Well, this time it ended up not bearing fruit, but any attempt is something worth complimenting, not something to criticize. That's my take on things, anyway."

"Hi..... Hinami....."

What a big-hearted person.....

"Rather than that, focus on the task I gave you. If you were to only think about the weird things you caused and not manage the task properly as a result, *then* I would get angry."

"A-ahh. About that, I kind of managed to do it. Analysing the conversation in

my own way, I mean."

"That's fine then. There's still three more days to go, so I'll just hear it all at the end. With that being the case, shall we end it here for today?"

"Ah, just a moment."

"Hn? Is there something you don't understand?"

"Err, no, rather than something I don't understand..... something like an incident. Actually, while I was going home yesterday....."

".....What?"

Glancing sideways at the now on-alert Hinami, I began explaining what had happened the day before.

* * *

"Bye bye—" "Bye then—" "See you tomorrow—"

Myself included, the group of six people arrived at the train station, and each boarded the train going in their respective directions.

"Ah, the train's here. I go this way." "Ah, me too! Bye then!" "Bye bye!" "See you~"

Just like that, we began splitting up. Since my home and Hinami's were in different directions, it was this train that she had left on. Which meant that, from this point, I had to talk to the people going in the same way as me without Hinami being present.

Nonetheless, it wasn't like Hinami hadn't considered this. She *had* said something like "Well, if it's only about ten minutes in the train you should be safe. Mimimi and Daichi's houses are in the same direction, so the the two of them will be sure to start up a conversation somehow. Both of them also have a different station from yours, and Mimimi will also be there." I had felt at ease even as I shuddered at the fact that she knew the stations of everyone in the group like it was a natural thing.

Then, after boarding the train. Just like Hinami had said, thanks to the two people who were like the very incarnation of communication ability itself, the conversation inside the train turned out to be somewhat manageable.

Especially thanks to Mimimi, who frequently helped direct the topic toward me, and whenever I frantically and wordily replied, managed to find a part that was funny and laugh at it. Similar to that time in the Home Economics Room, I didn't feel like I was being made fun of at all.

Therefore, I was of the impression that Mimimi was just as amazing as Hinami when it came to conversations.

Eventually, we arrived at the station nearest to my house. With this it was mission clear! Or so I thought.

"Ah, I get off here. See you."

"Ah, is that so! Me too! O—kay, let's go back together!"

"Eh!?"

The same station? Wait a minute, what's this all about, Hinami-san?

"Ah, see you. Tomozaki, don't do anything weird to Mimimi, okayy?"

Stop right there! Don't throw such a difficult joke at me while I'm confused!

"N-no, I w-won't be doing anything!"

"He's flustered.....! Might this be a crisis for myself, Nanami Minami's, chastity!?"

"Ahahahaha! Anyway, the door's going to close, see you."

I got off the train together with Mimimi.

"Eh, Mimimi's nearest station really *is* here....." "The door closed."I-it wasn't a joke, huh....."

"Eh? That's right. Why?"

"Ah, no, I.....never mind, it's nothing."

* * *

"Weren't our stations supposed to be different?"

When I questioned her, Hinami looked unconvinced.

"Well.....Mimimi's station is Kitayono, right? And yours is Omiya, so they *should* be different....."

"Mine's also Kitayono!"

"Eh.....?" Hinami fell even deeper into thought, then suddenly raised her face like she had realized something.".....You were, unnecessarily considerate there, huh.....a miscalculation, by me of all people....."

"What are you talking about?"

"I said it, didn't I? *At your nearest station.*"

"Like I said, what are you talking about?"

"Like I said, in the offline meeting between nanashi and NO NAME, I said to meet at your nearest station!"

".....Ah!" So it was like that! I hadn't told her my *actual* nearest station, because out of consideration, I had specified the more conveniently accessible terminal station. Because of that, she had incorrectly presumed my nearest station.....

"Well, there's no use in regretting. Let's both just forgive and forget here. Anyway, what happened next?"

"A, aah....."

On being prompted, I began to speak about the events that had followed once more.

Translator Notes:

[1] A gag (ギャグ) is pretty much a joke. You're probably already familiar with this Japanese usage of the word, but it's mentioned here just in case.

PART 6

We exited the station and began walking on the street. I had the feeling that nervousness was even causing my walking to be awkward.

"It's our first talk between just the two of us, right! Wait, in the first place, isn't it only *recently* that it started being ordinary for us to talk?!"

The first to speak, Mimimi slapped her forehead while going **taha—!**.

"T-That's true."

"*Whaat* are you being so nervous for? Straighten up! Yeah!"

With a thump, she hit my back with quite a bit more strength than was appropriate.

"Ow! That was too much power!"

"Eh~? *Rea~lly~?*"

Ka ka ka, laughed Mimimi spiritedly. It felt like she was being more cheerful than usual. Might this be her way of being considerate to me?

"Q-quite cheerful, aren't you, Mimimi....."

"Righhht~? My plan is to get by in life with only with cheerfulness and smiles, after all."

"Ahaha, I'm not sure if I should say that's amazing.....or that it sounds tough....."

"Sounds tough?" She looked at me with a face as if I said something strange.

"W-well.....like, there are also times when you *can't* become cheerful or smile.....right?"

Mimimi blinked confusedly.

"*Whaaat* are you saying! It's precisely in difficult times that you should smile! Otherwise it'll become even more difficult for you, you know!"

"Ah—" Hinami had *also* said something like that. The mind and body are linked together, or something. "Certainly, people do say that. That if you make things like your posture and face cheerful, your heart will follow, or something."

"Yep yep! That's why I think that it's definitely more fun living with cheerfulness and smiles!"

Heeh. Even as I thought to myself, *Isn't she amazingly positive?*, at the same time..... the thought, *Isn't it also fine to not have everyday be a fun day?* also ran through my mind. No, perhaps I had become numb in my outlook after going through so many not-fun experiences in my everyday, but it was more

like, *Surely humans can manage just fine even with a number of not-fun instants in their life.* Or rather than that, something like, *It's much more important to protect one's own world.*

As I was thinking such things, silence continued to fill the gap in conversation. Now it was probably my turn to talk, un. Right, of course.

"Hn, you don't seem to feel that way, though? Well, it depends on the person, right~"

"Ah, sor... T-that's true, isn't it."

For a moment, the atmosphere got awkward. *Arrrrrrrrgh! Sorry!* Even though she was trying to fill in the silence with a follow-up, I gave a pointless reply! Is this all the presence of a communicationally challenged has to offer!?

"Hey hey! Can I ask something I've been wondering about?"

However, Mimimi continued the conversation with a smile as if I hadn't really messed anything up. Yep, she's amazing.

After I answered with a "Eh? What is it?" she formed her hand into the shape of a microphone and raised it close to my mouth.

"Answer frankly, Tomozaki-senshu! You have a suspicious relationship with Aoi, right!?"^[1]

I suddenly spluttered and began to cough.

"Ohh! That reaction is *de-fi-nite-ly* suspicious. What's going on!? Come on~! Won't you tell Onee-san? Hmm~?"

"No, there's nothing going on!"



"Is that *really* true? It feels like you've been exchanging mysterious eye

signals, you know? Yesterday too, you called her *Hinami*. From the beginning, she was the *only* person you were about to call without any honorifics, you know?"

.....Had there been something like that? Or rather, even if there was, was it something you'd normally notice? I had been made to think that riajuu were just cheerful, but it seemed like they could read the mood and feelings very well too, so I had to be careful. Since she was so perceptive of everything, even if I made an attempt to fool her, it would probably be exposed.

"Not at all! Well, it's true that we don't have a bad relationship, but, look, Hinami gets along with everyone, right?"

"Ohh! You just called her without any honorifics! *Definitely* suspicious! Tomozaki-senshu! Why did you try to hide it back then? Is there anything you feel guilty about? Frankly! Please!"

"Like I said, there's nothing! In the first place, there's no way the school idol Hinami Aoi would have some guilty relationship with someone like me, right?"

"That's true!"

"Hey!" I retorted at Mimimi, who had been much too quick to agree there.

"Ahahahaha! That's great! As expected, you can be interesting once in a while, Tomozaki!"

"Shut it, I'm not trying to be interesting in the first place, also, that '*once in a while*' was unnecessary."

For whatever reason, my nervousness had faded away. Was it down to Mimimi's flair for conversation? Or was it because the topic of conversation had turned to that foul-mouthed gamer?

"Even though if you behaved like this you could always have fun. You're always so *gloomy*, you know, Tomozaki."

"It's not something you need to care about.Rather, I'm fine with having not-fun times too."

".....Ehhh!? What do you mean? Why is *that*?"

She latched onto my reply with great interest. Uhh, what should I say here.

"Ah.....How should I put it, the right answer may not be limited to fun things.....Probably."

"Ehh!? It's the first time I've heard someone say that! Please explain! Kay-double-you-ess-kay!"

"Kay-doub.....?".....Ahh, *kws*? It's not really something you say out loud, is it. "Ah, how should I put this? Look, for example, I like ATAFAMI, among other games....."[2]

"Ahh—! You *do* look like you're really strong at that! And then? And then?"

"Yea, err.....But those things are, like, completely unrelated to having fun at school or the like. However, I still want to give some time to ATAFAMI....."

"Hmm. Even so, isn't that because ATAFAMI is fun?"

"Ahh.....well that's also true, but, I mean..... It's not like I play ATAFAMI because I'm looking for something fun, but because I like ATAFAMI and try my best at it, the fun just comes naturally as a result.....err, sorry you probably don't understand what I'm saying."

"Hmm—, no, I understand."

"Eh?"

"Well, it's like that, you know. Tomozaki, in that sense, you might be a little bit like Tama."

".....Eh? Like Tama-chan?"

I'm not making the connection at all.Now that I think about it, Hinami also said something similar.

"Nnn, how should I put it? Like, that girl doesn't give in, or rather, can't be made to give in. Ahaha, well that's a really good characteristic to have, though. Well, there's those kinds of things."

"Hmm, that's true."

"Ah, Tomozaki also gets it? For example, like, even at a time where giving in would make the situation more enjoyable, if she's not convinced, she won't ever give in. I think that's *amazing*. So much that I respect her for it."

"Well, yeah, that's unusual for a young girl these days."

"Ahahahaha! The variety show old man came out!"

"Shut up!"

"Hahaha!well, anyway, when I look at her, I think that part of her is amazing, but at the same time, I also think it's something I don't have. You see, I'm someone who will always give in! Give in, give in, give in, doing anything to make the situation fun. So much that it's like I'm all crunched up."^[3]

"Eh, so it was like that, huh?" I had thought that doing that was part of her natural talent.

"Yup, that's how it is, you know~? Actually I'm a maiden with too many worries..... well, having said that, it's the same for everybody. Compared to what Tama has to worry about, it's really nothing. My worries are really really small!"

"True, that girl..... seems to have her fair share of difficulties."

"Riiight? You get it, right? But because of that, I, who always gives in, have to protect her, or something like that, that kind of feeling! My position! Any thoughts!? Tear-jerking!? Admirable?"

Mimimi, standing right in front of me, suddenly stretched out her hands.

"So it's like that." Because I was still in thought, I unconsciously ignored her. "So.....what does Mimimi think? Like, do you hate it?"

"Eh? Ignored!? Err, do I hate it? Of course not! It's something I'm doing to have fun, so of course it's fun! Well, there *are* times when I'd rather not give in, but it can't be helped. You can't get a perfect score in life! If I don't give in, it'll end up harder for me so I give in! Move towards a more enjoyable future! Right!?"

".....I see, something like, the right person in the right place?"^[4]

"Yeah, that, the right person in the right place! You say some good things, Tomozaki! It's my job to give in, and it's Tama's job to not! That's just how we function!"

"So, you're supporting each other."

"Right, right, we're supporting each other! Tomozaki, you really do say some good things! Well, though if you had to say which, you know, it really feels more like I'm supporting Tama! That's why I'm okay with the way things are right now!"

Saying this, *taha*— Mimimi laughed once again.

"Hmm, to me....."

"Ah! I'm going this way! Ah, did you say something just now?"

"Ah, err, it's nothing."

"Is that so? Then, see you later, Tomozaki!"

"Ah, yea, see you."

Just like that, Mimimi gave a big wave and left like a storm. Well, I hadn't managed to finish off what I was saying, but that was probably fine. It was just something I had surmised on my own without knowing the full situation, so it was probably the right decision to not to say it.

—That, to me, it felt like Mimimi was the one being supported.

Translator Notes:

[1] A bit like an honorific, *-senshu* is often appended to the end of an athlete/gamer's name in a commentary or interview. Literal translation of 選手 is player.

[2] *kws*k = short for 詳しく (*ku wa shi ku*), *i.e.* tell me more, in more detail.

[3] Original makes use of ポキポキ: cracking/crunching sound.

[4] What he actually says is something called a *yojijukugo*, where four kanji make up an idiom. Can be very meaningful stuff. The exact one he uses here is 適材適所.

PART 7

"Hmm... didn't you do pretty well?"

Hinami said this rather emotionlessly.

"Well, even I can manage a serious conversation. It's just that Mimimi helped liven it up."

"Hmm, there's also that, but..... it's apparent that there are also things you're good at."

".....Things.....that I'm good at?"

What's with that?

"It also seemed that way for the Home Economics Room incident, but it would appear that 'Speaking your thoughts as they are' seems to be a strong point of yours."

"Err? My thoughts as they are? Isn't that something anyone can do? You just have to say them, right?"

Hinami disapprovingly wagged a finger.

"Well you see, the actual situation is nothing like that. If anything, the number of people who *can't* do it is larger."

"Eh?"

"For example, Mimimi. She's good at giving in, right? So would you think that she's good at saying what she thinks?"

".....Ah, I see. So basically, she's good at saying things to meet the expectation of people around her."

"Yes." Hinami nodded in agreement. "Now for Hanabi. The chances are that she's good at it, right? Saying what she thinks."

".....I guess so."

"Now, the type of people like her. Are there many? Or are there few?"

Ahh..... only a few. Alright, she's convinced me.

"I see..... so it's not common, then? To be good at it."

"Yes, that's right. So in a sense, you can consider it to be your weapon, strong

point, or special move. Also, fighting in a field you specialize in is one of the basics of gaming, right?"

"Right, it is."

"Well then, if you ever get into trouble, it should be alright to rely on that. Remember that well."

".....Got it."

"Anyway, there weren't any *particular* problems with what you just told me, so let's continue. You're lucky to have collected some additional experience points.Next, I'm going to have you continue observing more conversations, are you prepared? "

"What is there to prepare.....for things like this, you just go to the scene, right....."

"You're getting it, aren't you. Well then, get *serious* about it. Since on the last day, I'll be hearing your analysis."

— Like this, once again, another three days of Level-Up-cum-Information-Gathering began.

Wednesday, lunch break, at the school cafeteria.

"Did you watch yesterday's programme? It makes you wonder what'll happen in the final episode, right?"

"However, that scene with the 'Come back here!' line sounded so monotone, I ended up laughing."

"Ahahaha! Me too! That was awful!"

"Rather, Tomozaki! Your eyes are darting all over the place! And you aren't saying a thing!"

"You're right! *Gross!*"

.....*Fumu fumu.* ^[1]

Thursday, after school, on the way to the station.

"Ah. That reminds me, Yumiko, was everything alright yesterday? You had a lot of phone calls from your dad, right?"

"Ah! About that! Actually it turned out that my brother wasn't making any sense and—"

"Eh? That small guy?"

"Yeah, him! Like, when I opened the front door, he was standing there with an intimidating pose. Something like this."

"What's with that, *gross!*"

"Seems like something Tomozaki-kun would do."

"Ahahaha! I can imagine that."

.....*Hou hou.* [2]

Friday, at the end of the break.

"Takahiro, don't you have any interesting stories to tell?"

"What's with that unreasonable request!"

"I'm *sure* you do. I'm sure!"

"Ehh—.....well.....ah, yesterday my girlfriend....."

"Uwaa— praising your girlfriend."

"I'm not!"

"Tomozaki, do you have anything like that to talk ab.....of course you wouldn't."

"Ahahaha! How rude."

.....*Umu umu.* [3]

It went something like that.

"So, how did it go?"

It was now the Friday after-school meeting. Four days where, every day I was thrown into the midst of groups of people I wasn't close to, and forced to observe and to apply a little. Four days that were like hell within hell. Today it was time to summarize them.

"I died inside."

".....Well, that's the fate of someone who releases a boring aura. However, if you train your facial expression, posture and conversation skill, then you'll be able to quickly escape that fate."

".....Is that really true?"

"Get into the mindset that it can't be helped to have a lot of bad things said about you. It's the nature of groups. When you gather around five to six people, well..... *someone* will become a sacrifice."

".....Understood."

"Anyway, what's important is your analysis result."

"Yes, well, I gave it a lot of thought, and....."

"Go on."

Thus, I discussed with a transcendental riau the frantic observations made from the point of view of a communicationally challenged. Nervously.

—What I had noticed was, the allocation of different roles within a conversation.

It seemed to me that each participant in a conversation had their own role similar to a 'Main Responsibility'.

Those roles were three in number: 'The people introducing a new topic', 'The people expanding the topic' and 'The people giving reactions'.

For example, on Monday, there was a conversation that went like this.

'Hey, listen up! Yesterday at cram school.....'

Mimimi would always use phrases like 'Listen up' or 'That reminds me' or 'Yesterday, you know...' to start conversations. The new topic would have almost *nothing* in common with the current topic. It was by the actions of 'The people introducing a new topic' that new conversations would begin. This much was obvious, though.

Then, from that topic, there were also people who would say, "In that case, there's also" or "That's similar to *blah blah*" to further develop the conversation. Those were 'The people expanding the topic'.

And then after hearing that, people who would in a joyful way, interject, laugh, or sometimes express their own opinion. Those would be 'The people giving reactions'. More or less.

Then, around the time a topic of conversation was coming to a close, it would once again be by the actions of 'The people introducing a new topic' that a new topic would be brought up.

Of course, there were also times when 'The people expanding a topic' or 'The people giving reactions' would *also* bring up new topics, and times when 'The people introducing a new topic' would switch over to a listening role. However, depending on each group, it appeared that the *main* role of each person was somewhat fixed. Also, one more thing. The following was also observed on Monday.

'Wowww, the teacher definitely did that on purpose.'

'As I thought, it's like that, right!?'

'Isn't it Minmi being loved?'

'Eh!? The opposite!?'

In this kind of way, Hashiguchi Kyouya and Tama-chan mainly played the role of expanding the conversation. *However*. Even though both of them were always participating in the conversation, for whatever reason, it somehow felt like they weren't at 'The core of the mood'.

'Come to think of it, have you memorized the vocabs? A hundred of them so suddenly is asking for too much, isn't it?'

That was Friday, the words of a certain riajuu who is a central figure.

What I considered to be important was that, even though all members expanded the conversation to some extent, the ones that introduced new topics were, in most cases, only a select few members. In the case of Monday, these members were Matsumoto Daichi, Mimimi and Hinami. Points at which Tama-chan or Hashiguchi Kyouya would introduce a new topic were practically nonexistent. In the long run, such times probably did exist, but it was clear that they were only few in number. Which is why, it was probably the case that if you didn't introduce new topics, then you wouldn't give an impression of being

at 'The core of the mood'.

Well, if I were to be asked, *So what?*, I wouldn't know how to answer, but that was pretty much what I had noticed.

".....So, because Tama-chan and Hashiguchi Kyouya didn't introduce any new topics, it seemed like they weren't in control of the mood. Something like that, I guess."

Hinami nodded in silence.

"I see. You know, what you've said, if a normal person were to listen to it, they would only think 'And? Is there any meaning in saying that?'. You haven't said anything that's not obvious."

"I th-thought as much....."

The fact that even I had thought so pierced my heart.

"—However, for someone like you and me, who, when trying to catch hold of something, will pay attention to things like objectives and causes, it's a *big* realization. As expected of you, nanashi."

Just as I was receiving damage, I was praised.
Eh, what's this happiness. Feels like the carrot and stick approach was successfully used on me.

"I-Is that so?"

"After all, with this even *you* understand, right? The two factors essential to being a good conversationalist."

.....Ahh, I see. I get it.

"Becoming better at 'Introducing a topic' and 'Expanding the topic', correct?"

"Right, Onitada."

"Eh?"

"So after this, it's just figuring out how to become better at those two things."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. It's already the third time you've said it, that *onitada*. What's with that?"

"....."

She clammed up!

".....Oh well, it's the third time already, I give up. It's a word that became a habit. So I sometimes say it out by mistake. Did you know? There's a retrogame I liked when I was little, 'YUKE! Uchimakuri Buin'. ^[4] It's Buin's words from that game. To be honest, it's a little bit embarrassing so I've tried to somehow gloss over it until now, but it's too bothersome. At any rate, even when I try not to say it, I end up saying it eventually, so I've decided to start using it more and more from now on. Therefore, could you not bring it up every time I use it? The end."

W-What's *with* her. She suddenly blabbered all of that, then turned on me, and then brought the matter to an end as she pleased.

Or rather...

"*Ahh*, so it was *Buin*! I *thought* I'd heard it somewhere before! Now I remember! So you liked that, did you?"

".....Hmm. Knowing about that, sure lives up to my expectation of Japan's number one gamer. Not very many people seem to know about it, that game. Even though it's *such* a masterpiece!"

Hinami's voice became unusually lively.

"That's so true! I used to play it at a friend's house. The pig Buin sure was cute, wasn't it! 'Like an Oni, Tadashii! Onitada!', right?.....That was such a great game!"^[5]

"I agree. At first it made me think it was just another game trying to profit off the characters, ^[6] but considering the specs for that time, in actuality it had features that must have been difficult to come up with, like 2.5D parallax scrolling, so it was also amazing from a technical standpoint. Despite already having all that, there was also a unique worldview that would excite the hearts of children! Cute characters too! It really was a wonderful piece of work."

As Hinami spoke, she wore the pure and fun smile of a maiden. S-She could make that kind of face!?

"Yeah, it really was, wasn't it." I said while averting my eyes.

"You really *do* understand, don't you! Oinky brought me into the world of gaming..... or rather..." As if she had realized what she was saying, Hinami suddenly turned her face away from me and cleared her throat with a cough. "We're way off topic."

Perhaps because she had been having fun being able to talk about things she liked, her cheeks were now slightly red.

"A, ahh. We are, aren't we. Right, so..."

"We were discussing how you might be able to improve your conversation skills, correct?"

Hinami disappointedly returned to the main topic, folding her arms and looking somewhat dissatisfied.

"Yeah, well, let's leave the conversation about Oinky for another time."

"Right. Let's return to the topic at hand. Then, do you understand? How you can get better at conversing."

"Hmm..... well, maybe something like copying a person who's good at it?"

"Onitada."

"That was fast."

"If you've recognized those two important things, all that's left is to observe how a pro does it and just copy. Once you know what's important, you know what parts to focus on, right?"

"I see. That's certainly true."

"By the way, you've been mentioning the 'Mood' since a while ago, but do you know what it is? "

"Err? What the 'Mood' is?"

.....Now that she mentioned it, I vaguely knew things like, *He's in control of the mood*, or *The mood is pretty bad*, but I had never given it any further thought, and if asked to explain what it actually *was*, wouldn't really know how to answer.

".....Well, I don't really know. What is it?"

Let's just obediently ask.

"Actually, what people refer to as the 'Mood' is really 'The standard for judgement in that situation'."

Err, 'The standard for judgement in that situation'?

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let's see. Put in simple terms, it's the standard for judging what actions will be seen as good and what actions will be seen as bad. But only within that group of people, mind you. For example, just as there are groups that value getting along well, there are also groups that think getting along so energetically like university students is uncool, right? That standard for judging good and bad is called the 'Mood'."

"Ah—..... I see."

It was a vague feeling, but I kind of felt like I understood it. As well as the fact that Mimimi was easily influenced by it while Tama-chan didn't get influenced at all.

"And so, like that, the standard of judgment that was created in that group that doesn't apply elsewhere is called the 'Mood'."

Hmm.

".....I kind of get it, but having only heard it just now, I get the feeling that I haven't fully understood it yet."

"That's fine. Since it's a complicated matter, at the current level, it's not important to understand it to such an extent. It's fine to just remember it with the understanding that it may be useful someday. For now, it should be sufficient just to be able to vaguely *feel* the 'Mood'."

"So that much is enough?Got it. I'll keep that in mind. However, I've yet to hear the important bit from you."

Hinami gave a broad smile.

"Oh? And what is that?"

"By just imitating a pro, it's quite hard to get good, don't you think? How should I put it, like, the body of the person doing the imitation might not be able to keep up..... The intended movements *themselves*, due to a level difference in the fundamental abilities, it might not actually be possible to imitate them, right."

That's right. Even if someone were to try to imitate a pro, it might be an impossible task for that person from the very beginning. Or at least, in games, this was often the case. Due to the difference in operating technique.

So for example, even in a conversation, if I were to think, *I should raise a new topic here, or, This is a good chance to make a friendly retort*, but couldn't actually do it, I would consider it to be a case of being unable to imitate the pro due to this 'Difference in operating technique'. Well, certainly in this aspect, 'Life' too was a game, huh.

"True. Just as you say. It's necessary to build up your skills."

"Right? However, they aren't really things you can acquire overnight....."

"Actually, that's the simplest part."

"Eh? Simple?"

"Yes, it's simple." said Hinami, who cheerfully raised the index finger of her right hand. "You just have to memorize them."

".....Memorize?"

"Yes. *Simple*, right?"

Hinami laughed impishly. I was being teased.

"Give me a proper explanation. What do you mean?"

"It's *very* straightforward."

Hinami took out her pencil case from her bag. Then from inside it, retrieved some flashcards and started flipping through them.

"What's that?" As I spoke, I took a peek at the flashcards in Hinami's hands — and was astonished. ".....Are you *serious*? That's....."

As for what was *written* on the flashcards, well. To take an example, on the

back of 'On the subject of Class 2's Nakajima Kentarou's younger brother' it was 'Even though he says that getting into the junior high division of a public university is easy, he hasn't even taken the test.'. For the card 'What my mother said to me in the middle of May', the back said 'Even though you're so good in your studies, the western clothes you wear look stupid.'. For the card 'The funny scene in the third episode of the drama "My Secret Father" ', the back said 'The scene where Sugawara Yuusuke fell down, he took too much care not to hurt himself, so the way he fell over made it look like a comedy skit.'..... And so on. They were gathered together in a fairly thick bundle.

"See? Isn't it straightforward?"

Grinning happily. Scary.

"You've..... memorized them? Conversation topics?"

"Correct."

Maintaining the same smile, as if she was wearing a Hannya mask. [7]

"No, but, isn't this is already, like, *insanity*?"

"What are you saying? Be it remembering the attack and defense values on all equipment in an RPG, or remembering the individual characteristics of all monsters in a monster raising game, this is the same, you know?"

As Hinami said this, she opened her large pencil case and displayed its contents: a large number of flashcards which probably served the same purpose as the ones before. There were *mountains* of them in there, all densely packed together.

"Ughh....."

"Just *what* are you making such a pathetic sound for. If you do this, you won't ever find yourself in a situation where you've run out of things to say, right?"

That's true, but..... if anyone normal were to find out, they'd definitely be put off.

".....That's *amazing*, though. If someone used this to prepare, it's certain that they would *never* run out of things to talk about....."

Well, I'm convinced, but.....

"So, you want me do this as well, is that right?"

I unconsciously raised my guard a little.

"Isn't that obvious? Though, *how* you do it is up to you. It doesn't have to be flashcards. It's not like you don't know how to study, right? That being the case, do it in a way that's easy for *you*. As long as you're able remember the topics, it's fine. "

"G-got it."

"Then, as far as guidance regarding conversations goes, let's end it here for now."

"Ah, wait, there's still something I don't understand."

"What?"

"Even assuming that I can memorize the subject matter, whenever I strike up conversations with other people, I always end up fumbling, right? So what should I do about that? Ah, practice saying 'Excuse me'? "

".....Get used to it."

In response to my question, Hinami pressed a finger to her forehead and replied with an annoyed voice.

"Furthermore, even if it's practice, when starting a conversation with people your age, '*Excuse me*' isn't the right phrase, is it....."

"Ah, r-right."

While saying "Good grief" and sighing, Hinami packed her flashcards back into her pencil case and her pencil case back into her bag.

"Phew..... today's been quite tiring."

"Agreed. I've explained a lot of new things today, and *you've* also spoken a good deal regarding your own thoughts. However, since there were a lot of important things in what the both of us talked about, when you get home, and also when you have time like on Saturday night, review all of it again."

"Review? Is working from memory really good enough? I *think* I remember everything.....but there's also some unsurety."

"Yes, I thought so. Use this."

From her shirt pocket, what Hinami *now* took out was something baton-shaped, about the size of her palm, an object with a *PLAY* button and a *RECORD* button.

".....A sound recorder?"

"It's a so-called IC Recorder. ^[8] Today's conversation that we're having right now, all of it has been recorded right from the beginning."

Just when had she...?

"Haha, so thoroughly prepared..... eh, wait, did you go out of your way to buy it just for this?"

"It's something I already had. This thing, it's useful in various ways, you see. This time round it's only a temporary loan."^[9]

Various ways... I wonder what she uses it for. Judging from the way she used flashcards, this was probably something scary as well so I didn't ask. With a "Here", Hinami passed it to me.

"T-thank you."

"It's divided into folders. This folder only contains today's recording, so if you just press the play button, you'll be able to listen to it. You can also insert earphones here."

"G-got it."

I wondered if being considerate about small things like this was also a skill specific to extreme riajuu.

"Now, about the plan for tomorrow."

"Eh? Tomorrow? Wait, isn't tomorrow a Saturday?"

At our school, Saturdays were holidays.

"Yes, that's precisely why. Unless you have something *else* planned?"

"Well.....no, I don't." *As frustrating as it may be.* "What is it? Independent practice at home?"

"Nope, nothing like that."

"Hn?"

Upon which Hinami, as if it was natural, said the following.

"Let's arrange to meet at 11 o'clock at Omiya station. I'll have you accompany me for a day."

A date!?!.....Well, probably not, but, eh??!

Translator Notes:

[1] Put your hand to your chin, nod your head, say *fumu fumu*, and everyone will be aware that you are deep in thought analyzing the conversation like Tomozaki here.

[2] Repeat *fumu fumu* process, but frown slightly and narrow your eyes this time, I suppose.

[3] Same as before, really. Add a self-satisfied smile if you want. You've really made it clear how deep in thought you are, good work!

[4] This one's a bit tough to translate in a way that sounds fine yet keeps the original meaning, so please keep reading the rest of this note. The original Japanese is 'ゆけ！ うちまくりブイン'. Now, ゆけ！ (yuke!) as GO! is fine. The character's name ブイン (Buin) is *presumably* a reference to the sound that Japanese pigs make (Bu-Bu-), so Oinky is a satisfactory localization. うちまくり is something along the lines of hitting without ever stopping. It's hard to tell if the hits refer to physical punching or to ranged attacks, but if you really want a rough translation for this, it might be something like *GO! Fists of Flurry Oinky*. There may be further clarification when chapter 3 or 4 of the manga comes out.

[5] Okay. So, the explanation of Onitada. First of all, the word *Oni* (鬼) roughly translates to *ogre/demon*, and *Tadashii* (正しい) roughly translates to *correct*. Now, the image that an Oni conveys is something that is very strong. So, one interpretation is, "You're correct on the same level as the strength of an Oni". Or, "What you're saying is very very very very *RIGHT*".

[6] Original: キャラゲー (kyara-ge/chara-game), which is a video game that uses characters from manga/anime etc, presumably to help the game sell despite it being otherwise rubbish with regard to its contents.

[7] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannya>

[8] IC Recorder is a Japanese term for a digital voice recorder. In other words, it records to its own storage instead of to a tape.

[9] She says *this time* because, remember, the masks were gifts. Which, in the interests of personal hygiene, made sense, of course.

Chapter 4: In the case that the first companion is a girl, for a short while it is possible to go adventuring pretending it is a date

Part 1

Then, the appointed day. I arrived in Omiya, boasted to be the largest city you go to as a compromise when it's too much of a bother to go to Ikebukuro or Shinjuku. Incidentally, should the prefecture have discovered that I went to Ikebukuro even though my business could have been done in Omiya, I would have been executed as a traitor by the mascot of Saitama-ken, Kobaton. ^[1]

"Did I.....Did I.....make, you wait?"

"Not at all, I just got here."

Even a Text To Speech program would have had more modulation. That was how monotone a reading voice it was with which she expressed her anger.

"I'm terribly sorry!"

Late by one minute.

".....Well at any rate, you were probably stuck there worrying[I don't own single set of presentable clothes, but I should probably fix my appearance as much as possible so it won't be embarrassing]or something. So good-for-nothing."

".....You've understood quite well."

Having been seen through to this degree of unparalleled accuracy, I couldn't even stay depressed. That was just how spot on her evaluation had been.

"Well, at the offline meeting, you had the nerve to come looking like *that*, so I suppose you might have made a little progress."

"Shut it."

It was more to do with how big of a deal this [Walking alongside Hinami Aoi in the streets] situation was, though. Was this person aware of the magnitude of such an incident? It was more or less my way of being considerate.

"Well then, let's get going."

"Just a moment. Today's objective, could you let me know what it is?"

I had only been told to meet here without knowing anything, after all.

"Hmm.To put it the other way around, what do *you* think it is? The reason for coming to Omiya, for the sake of becoming a riajuu."

"Eh? A quiz?"

Think about it on your own, huh. I see. *Hmmm*.

As I thought about it, I continued looking at Hinami, who was standing in front of the rendezvous location, [Mame no Ki]. [2]

—Still, was it usually possible to look *this* good when simply standing around like that? Was that a blue, long, and thin coat? And underneath it, a T-shirt resembling a one-piece dress? Such was the kind of clothing she was wearing, simple yet at the same time kind of eccentric. An appearance that could be described as cute, yet could also be described as beautiful. It was utterly incomprehensible to me as to whether this was due to her raw specs being good, or else, down to the wearing sense of her attire. At any rate, had I seen a celebrity live, this was probably how it would have felt. Such was the kind of aura I was taking in.



While thinking such things as I vacantly stared at Hinami, two student-like

males who were waiting diagonally opposite us started going "Isn't that..... Hinami.....?" ".....It really is.....", audibly whispering to each other while looking in our direction. Eh, could it be, although I was thinking it was *like* seeing a celebrity live, might this person *actually* be.....? I mean, judging by her extremely high specifications, it wasn't *completely* impossible.

".....Hey, Hinami, might you by any chance be a celebrity?"

Dumbfounded, I whisperingly asked the aura's standing personification about it.

"What's that, so suddenly."

"I mean, just now, diagonally to us....." I explained.

"Ahh.Well, I'm not an celebrity, but I might be a public figure. Especially in the area around this neighborhood."

"Public figure? What's the difference from being a celebrity?"^[3]

"They aren't particularly engaged in public entertainment, but are famous nonetheless."

"So how does that work in your case?"

"Well, I *do* frequently place first in the nationwide trial exams, and last year, participated a bit in the nationwide track and field events.....coupled together with these looks, as a result my name is fairly well known."

Be it ranking first in the nationwide trial exams or participating in the nationwide track and field events, the way in which a boast about something an ordinary human being would have spent countless hours of preparation to achieve could be said without hesitation in a single breath was a vertigo-inducing thought.

"Just a moment, please. I *did* think you were amazing, but to that extent?"

I had at the very least thought she was at the level of not losing to anyone in our school. But really, *national constituency* tier?

"Haven't I always said it? That I'm confident enough to not lose to anyone regardless of what field it is."

This wasn't said in a boastful manner; rather, it was handled in a *this is so troublesome* tone of voice.

".....Just *what* do you do to be left with those kind of results, seriously."

"Nothing in particular. I simply, in whatever field it may be, think just a little more than anyone else, and persevere for just a little bit longer than anyone else. That's enough on that subject, now hurry up and think."

No, that's simple to say in words but that's really.....

—I, was, possibly, working together with an individual who was a lot more unbelievable than I had imagined.

"The reason for coming all the way here.....for me to.....*get used to crowds?*"

"Really.....you might be on a level much lower than I had anticipated....."

Hinami massaged her temples in exasperation.

Translator Notes:

[1] Kobato is a Japanese word for a (young) pigeon. Kobaton is simply the more endearing name given to Saitama-ken's mascot (Note: -ken = -prefecture). Image Search コバトン for further details.

[2] Mame no Ki is an actual meeting point inside Omiya station. Literal translation is along the lines of beanstalk. If you do an image search for 豆の木 大宮駅, you should find pictures of the metal sculpture.

[3] The original is 有名人 vs 芸能人 here, you can kind of see the slightly different nuance.

Part 2

The first place I was taken along to was a bookshop. Though, why a bookshop, I wondered.

"Hey, what are we doing here?"

"Studying.....or rather, *deciding* the next course of action."

"Course of action?"

Hinami briskly walked over towards the magazine section, then stopped her feet at the fashion corner.

"If you were to teach AtaFami to a complete amateur, would *you* decide the character they'd be using?"

I had become used to this person suddenly starting a conversation about games.

"No, I wouldn't. Well, as one might expect, if they wanted to choose a fairly disadvantageous character, then I'd stop them. However, well, foundationally, I think I'd have them proceed as they liked with the character they found easiest for them to use. Though I think that to some extent, I'd let them know, *This one's easy to use, you know*, or something."

Hinami nodded.

"That's right, isn't it. Now, why is that?"

"Well, that'd be because that way of doing things is more enjoyable. If it were to be unenjoyable for them, their motivation would fall, and it would ultimately end up being disadvantageous in the long run."

"Un, quite so. That's also why we've come to a bookshop."

".....What do you mean?"

Hinami picked up a men's fashion magazine and opened it.

"Now, what kind of fashion do you think looks cool? Whatever clicks first is fine."

While saying that, she flipped through the pages.

"Even if you were to ask me to choose from a selection....."

"Today, using that as reference, we'll be going to buy some clothes. Now, how about it?"

".....Ahh, now I get it."

In other words, this was equivalent to choosing my character.

"But, is it okay for me to choose? Like, I don't have any fashion sense....."

"It's fine. After all, with this kind of magazine, it'll be stylish whichever one you pick. Well, there's still the possibility of it not suiting you, but in that case I'll stop you."

"I see."

Still, looking at them this way, each and every one of them was stylish. To me, the bar was set too high for every one of them. More precisely, they didn't match my stature. After groaning about it for a little under five minutes, I kind of just thought, *Well, isn't this one reasonably to my liking?* and, *really* going with whatever first clicked in my mind, pointed at one of the models.

"I'm not sure, but maybe something like this?"

Without any sort of confidence. Also, I only noticed after making my choice, but what was written there were things like Jacket (¥44,800). Ahh, looks like this was too expensive for me anyway.

"I see, this one, huh.Un, I don't mind." Having said that, Hinami closed the magazine, and started up a navigation app on her smartphone. "Well then, let's get going."

"Eh? Where to?"

"Isn't it obvious? To a shop where they sell clothes used in the outfit you chose."

I d-don't have that kind of money, though!

Where we next arrived at was what had to be the most stylish space I had ever been in throughout my entire existence. So *this* was what a clothes shop

felt like..... En-route, upon being directed to in a way that half-felt like I was being blackmailed, I had withdrawn money from an ATM. However, the sum total of my pitiful monetary balance was so uninspiring that if I were to purchase the jacket from earlier, almost all of it would be used up.

"Hold on Hinami, I uh, don't have much money, so there isn't any leeway to be buying expensive clothes here."

"That's okay."

Hinami handed me a jacket.

"No, like I was saying, I can't really afford a price like 40,000.....huh?"

The number written on the price tag that entered my line of sight was (¥9,720).

"Eh.....wait, didn't you say we'd be going to a store for the outfit from earlier?"

"Yes, I did say that."

"Th-Then why.....Does the price differ this much within the same store? "

"That's not it. It's the same brand as the shirt worn underneath the jacket in the outfit from earlier."

".....Ahh, so that's what you meant."

Basically, she hadn't actually said we'd be going to a shop with the same branding as the *jacket*. It had been that kind of trick.

"Generally, in fashion magazines, the brand names and prices of the clothes on *display* will be shown. Once you've found an outfit that you think is stylish, you refer to the section that shows the prices. From there, you can look for a brand with a price range you think you can afford, and then go with that."

Additionally, supposing it were to be filled with nothing but expensive brands, you just needed to find a different outfit. Proceeding in this way, it seemed that you would find something suitable eventually.

"If you do that, you can't really go wrong. This time, in the outfit you selected, the only item from this brand was the shirt, but, for outfits presented in these

magazines, even if it's just a single shirt, they'll pick brands that have matching pieces for the whole body. Therefore, even for other pieces, well, you can assume that they'll match your liking."

Plain and simple.

".....I see, with this method, it seems even I could do it."

"Heeh, isn't that great. You've become motivated enough to think about doing it on your own."

"That's why I've been saying, when it comes to games, I don't cut any corners."

"You *did* say that, didn't you."

Hinami seemed to be in high spirits.

".....Anyway, I still haven't been taught the crucial bit yet."

"The selection method, you mean?"

"That's right. With this many choices, I can't come to a decision. How should I go about deciding?"

"Oh, but that's the easiest bit."

"Easiest? Surely not, aren't clothes something you choose with full use of your fashion sense and experience? It's unthinkable for some kind of simple strategy to exist....."

"That's right, obviously. Without making full use of fashion sense and experience, it's difficult to differentiate the stylish clothes from the rest. The thing called fashion, isn't something that can be learned in such a short space of time."

".....Then wh-"

"Here, do you know what this is?"

Cutting off my words, Hinami pointed her finger slightly upwards.

In that direction, wearing a T-shirt and jacket was a so-called.....

"It's a mannequin."

"You understand now, right?"

The finger that had been pointing at the mannequin now snapped towards me, and holding it in place, she continued.

"You buy this as a set."

—Upon actually having this pointed out, it seemed like a simple, cheat-like technique, and well, it was *certainly* the kind of tactic where you couldn't really go too wrong.

"Now, this mannequin's outfit, who do you think came up with it?"

"The store's employees, right?"

"Correct. The employees of a clothing outlet, they would have to be *quite* stylish, more so than the ordinary people frequenting the area, right? Or rather, they couldn't have been employed as such if they didn't have some level of self-confidence."

"Well, that's true. For me, trying to become an employee at a clothes store would be a fruitless endeavor."

"So, the outfits on mannequins. Considering their role as an in-store[Advertisement]display, in order to sell, those employees with confidence in regards to clothing would have given the matter some careful thought."

".....I see."

"Moreover, it would have likely been discussed amongst several people. A specially organized discussion between several fashion-conscious employees, you know? No matter how you look at it, don't you think their decision would be a safe bet?"

"Well.....I suppose so."

I was convinced.

"Got it? You said that being fashionable or stylish is pretty difficult without full use of fashion sense and experience, didn't you?"

"Right."

"If so, it should be fine to simply borrow the exact result of what *fashion-*

conscious people have come up with through full use of fashion sense and experience. That's all there is to it."

".....Right, I see."

Certainly, even in AtaFami, the shortcut to improving was to, before all else, first steal someone else's ideas. Imitating a skilled player.

"Next, all that's left is to wear the outfit exactly as it was presented. If you keep on making your purchases in this way, you'll gradually acquire a sense for it, and it'll become possible to proceed *without* the mannequin shopping."

"Understood.Ah, may I ask a question?"

"What now?"

"You said *mannequin shopping*, but does that include buying the mannequin itself?"

".....Are you an idiot?"

With an answer in the form of[Abuse]that was neither denial nor affirmation, I judged that I was mistaken on my own.

Since the store's interior had three mannequins, I was urged to select one of them that was to my liking, so I ended up having to choose one on the spot using whatever inspiration I had.

".....Well then, go ahead and try them on."She went ahead and said such a thing so straightforwardly.

"EHH!? Try them on!?"

Wait, nonononono! Is it *really* okay to try them on? Actually, I'd have to go talk to one of the stylish people inhabiting this stylish space, wouldn't I? Isn't such a thing unreasonable!?

"Just *what* are you so surprised about? You're being overly self-conscious. They won't mind, hurry up and try them on, will you?"

"Hold on a sec! You can't go wrong with mannequin shopping, right!? Then, surely there's no need to try the clothes on, is there!"

"That's how it is for the *outfit*. But there's still the issue of what the right size

is. Well, with your build, you probably couldn't go wrong with Size M, but just in case, you know. For future reference."

"No.....but, uuu....."

If I were to be asked something to the effect of if the size was right, well, it would already be a world I had no understanding of, so I wasn't able to make any counter-arguments.

"Go on."

"I-I'm saying it?"

"Isn't that obvious? Whenever you buy clothes on your own from now on, you'll also be trying them on, you know? In a sense, *saying it yourself* is also something like practice for later on."

"So I'm going to keep doing it in the future, am I.....trying on clothes, that is."

"Correct."

Her curt tone of voice indicated that any further dialogue would be futile. I suppose I had no choice but to do it.....

".....Wh-wh-what sort of thing would be good to say.....?"

With my voice quivering. Just *what* was that. Objectively speaking, completely uncool.

"*I'm interested in buying that mannequin's complete set, is it possible to try it on?* Or something. Anything goes, really."

"Eh? Err, *I'm interested in buying that mannequin's complete set*.....What was it again?"

"*Is it possible to try it on?*"

"*I'm interested in buying that mannequin's complete set, is it possible to try it on?*Was that okay?"

"Fine."

Having to be given this kind of assistance that was on a level reminiscent of words like *caregiving* or *rehabilitation*, it had ended up becoming quite the inexcusable situation.

".....I'm interested in buying that mannequin's complete set, is it possible to try it on.....right."

Resolving myself, I approached the shop assistant so as to begin the conversation. A y-young woman. With a ponytail adorning her nape. *Yikes.*

"Erm! Excushe me!"^[1]

Alright, looking good so far.

"Coming—!"

"Erm, uhh, uhhh—"While saying all this, I pointed at the mannequin I had chosen earlier.

"*That* one?"

"Yes. Uhh.....that mannequin, please!"

Would you look at that. It ended up seeming like it was the mannequin that I wanted. Simply the worst case scenario. *However.*

".....Right, so, the clothes on that mannequin as a set, correct? Will you be trying them on?"

"P-Please!"

Thanks to the shop assistant's magnanimity, it ended up going *not* according to plan, but smoothly nonetheless.

In this kind of fashion, after some twists and turns, after trying the clothes on, in the end I earned Hinami's signature of approval, and in exchange for about 30,000 in expenses, obtained a top and bottom set of stylish clothes for myself.

"Hey hey! Wear it right now, please!"

Once the bill had been dealt with, a cheerful voice could be heard, its origin right next to my ear. *Who's that?* I had thought, but, well, of course, it was the voice of Hinami feigning friendliness.

"Sir, will you be wearing it now?"

"Yeah! *Won't* you, *pleaaase!*"

A smile of absolute perfection now faced my direction. The only possible

meaning such a thing had, was[WEAR IT].

".....Ah, then, please."

Then, with a, *Then, this way please*, I was shown to the changing room, where I proceeded to change my clothes. As for the clothes I had originally been wearing, they were folded up by the shop assistant and placed into a bag. Upon my leaving the changing room, I was told something to the effect of "It quite suits you～", which was slightly embarrassing.

Just as I was feeling so *very* impressed by the splendid level of service, as I passed by the shop-assistant, she, in a way so as to not be overheard by Hinami, impishly told me, "Your girlfriend is so cute and nice, isn't she. Make sure you take good care of her!" in a whispering tone of voice.

In response to my flustered "No, we're not like that!" denial, I received a "Ah, of course you aren't, right." in reply. *Hey*, what do you mean, *of course*. Well, I mean, you're not *wrong*, but, *hey*.

Then.

"Well now, it seems there's still a bit of time left before the appointment at the hairdresser's."

".....So you even already made an appointment for that, did you."

By this point, the extent of this person's thorough planning was no longer a cause for much surprise.

"Indeed. Well then, even if it's just to kill some time.....shall we go, get something to eat together?"

It was probably the type of scene that *should* have made my heart beat a little faster, but this was kind of different somehow.....

"Ooh, sounds great, I was just starting to feel a bit hungry myself. Should we go to a random family restaurant? Or else, since we've come all the way to Omiya, perhaps something distinctly Omiya-ish would be nice? Then again there's no such thing as something Omiya-ish, is there. Well, maybe a Sakitama rice ball if we can find one. Haha."^[2]

As I was saying this joke, for some reason Hinami started looking at me with

an expression that was close to scorn. Incidentally, a Sakitama rice ball was a local specialty bread of Saitama that was made with rice flour. In the same way as how Japan had rice and part of Southeast Asia had taro as *their* staple foods, Saitama had befriended the Sakitama rice ball as *its* staple food.

"Really, you. You're having a meal with a *woman*, moreover that woman is *that* Hinami Aoi, you know? Do you *really* think it would be fine to go to some family restaurant, which has no ambience, no nothing?"

"No no no, you and I, we've long since passed the point of having that sort of feeling, haven't we?"

"Well, enough of that. Anyway, in this area. There's a Hamburg restaurant."^[3]

"Heeh. Have you been there before?"

"Never."

"Hmmm. Then, what's up? Is there going to be some sort of special training specific to Hamburg restaurants?"

"Not particularly."

"Huh? Is that so? Then, why a Hamburg restaurant?"

"I just had a craving for it."

"Eh? That's all?"

".....That's right."

"Just had a craving for Hamburg steak? *Hinami Aoi* did?"

".....What? Is anything wrong with that?"

"No, nothing's wrong....."I had thought that she had chosen that shop because she had prepared yet another training regime. "You love Hamburg steaks, huh."

"Noisy, aren't you! Just *how* many times are you going to say that.....it has a good reputation among my friends, that's all. Hurry up and get going."

Saying so, she began walking at a steady pace. *Heeh*. Because she had a craving for it, huh. So she had that side to her as well, did she. Hmmm, unexpected.

Then, the Hamburg restaurant that Hinami took me to, resembled the kind of place one might find advertised with the text, *Tucked Away In The Forest!*, what with how small and sweet it was. The storefront had a single table, where below a parasol there existed a wooden, circular table, next to which two chairs modelled after tree stumps had been placed. It was an exterior that well-deserved a place in the world of picture books.

Hinami and I traversed that storefront stand, entered the shop, and sat ourselves down at a two-seater table. I gave the menu a brief look, and with a, *Well, this one, I guess*, quickly made my decision, then began waiting for Hinami to finish making hers. However, even after about another three more minutes of waiting, Hinami, with a serious expression, remained facing her menu in silence.

".....I wonder which one to pick."

"You seem pretty undecided, huh."

"Whereas *you've* already made your choice, haven't you?Which one did you pick?"

Unusually, Hinami spoke in a somewhat reserved tone of voice. I had thought she'd had the intention of saying something like "I don't have any particular interest in what you've chosen. As for me, I'm just going to be choosing the one / want to eat.", so it was slightly unexpected.

"Hn. This one, the Tomato Cheese Hamburg."

"Hmm, is that so. Yes, that seems good too. It does seem that way, doesn't it....."

While pressing a finger to her lips, groaning with the same amount of seriousness she might have had had she been searching for evidence at a crime scene.

"Hi-Hinami..... ? "

"By the way, Tomozaki Fumiya-kun. I'd like to make a proposition."

"Hn?"

It was rare for me to be addressed by my full name, so I was slightly

bewildered. Her facial expression was *very* serious.

"Is that fine? I'll be ordering this Wafuu Sauce Cheese-in-Hamburg.
Therefore....."[4]

"Uhuh."

"So, trading half of it for half of your Tomato Cheese Hamburg, how does that sound?"

Treating the matter with a great amount of seriousness, as if a mysterious, dangerous weapon had finally been identified, Hinami spoke solemnly. *puh!* . I unintentionally let out a short burst of laughter.

".....Just what are you laughing about? It's unpleasant."

"Ahh, sorry." Even as I apologized, I couldn't hold back a smirk.

"Wanting to eat the Tomato Cheese Hamburg, but also wanting to eat the Wafuu Sauce Cheese-in-Hamburg. Given such a situation, such a rational proposition isn't anything out of the ordinary, don't you think? I haven't done anything to be laughed at."

"R-right, of course that makes sense. Let's do that, halvesies, yeah, let's do that." I then recalled what Hinami had eaten when we had visited the pasta restaurant — carbonara. "You really love cheese, don't you."

"So bothersome! What I like doesn't matter here! Anyway, it's decided that we'll be splitting our orders half-half, right?Just how long do you intend to keep laughing, seriously. It's really unpleasant. Hurry up and make your order."

As one would expect, any more than that would have been a discourtesy, so I suppressed my laughter with fighting spirit and made my order as instructed.

While drinking from the glasses of water that had been carried over to our table, we waited for the Hamburg steaks to arrive.

"That reminds me, did you listen to the IC Recorder?"

Passed on to me yesterday by Hinami, the IC Recorder that contained the audio recording of our after-school evaluation session. Since it had been handed over for the purpose of revision, for the time being I had given it a single listen before going to bed the night before.

"Ah, yeah, I did."

"How did it go? Was there anything that you realized?"

"That I *realized*?"

I mean, I had played back the things we had talked about during that day's after-school session on the night of the day itself, so I could pretty much remember the contents perfectly, but as for what I had *realized*.....

"Hmm, the way I asked is probably at fault. [*Other than the contents*], was there anything that caught your attention?"

"Other than the contents.....?Ah-"

"There was something, right?"

".....The voice."

Yes, there had been something. The contents of our conversation had been fairly identical to my recollection of them. Just, there had been *one* thing that had differed from what I had imagined.

"My, voice, or rather, way of talking? Compared to what I'd had in mind, it was completely....."

"Righht?"

A tone of voice that implied she had been waiting for that answer.

"Yeah. People do often say that your own voice is very different from what you imagine it to be, but, after listening for the first time to a natural conversation like that for such an extended period of time.....it was slightly surprising. I was murmuring way too much, wasn't I."

".....Hm, after listening to yourself, you realized this on the first try. With this being the case, that *will* improve."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. This is something that can also be said about a tone-deaf person, but, if someone is able to realize that the sounds they give voice to aren't quite right, then they can correct it by practising repetitively. To a certain extent, that is."

"I see."

It did feel like I had heard about that sort of thing. That only those who weren't able to perceive that were *truly* tone-deaf.

".....However, you mutter *quite* a lot, don't you. It'd be better if you had some remedial training."

"I mutter quite a lot, do I."

"Yes. The fact that the way you speak can be heard as muttering, is because of your over reliance on the words themselves."

"Over reliance on the words themselves?"

"For example, whenever I'm giving an explanation about something, you always reply with something like [I see]or [Is that so?], there's various patterns to be found in what you say, right?"

"Eh, is that so?"

"Yes indeed. It's likely that you're doing it subconsciously. Well, you probably think repeating the same words over and over is rude or something, and subconsciously act with that in mind, but..... in short, you're changing your words, but also have to do the same for your tone."

"The same for my tone?"

"Yes. Basically, things like facial expression, or intonation, or gestures, you don't really use them very much in conversation. Always the *same* intonation, the *same* tone of voice."

"Ah—"

That was quite likely to be the case.

"Which is why, for, let me see, then, *the duration of our lunch break right now*, I'll be giving you a single task."

"Task?"

"Correct. And as for the description of that task."

"Yes?"

"—From now on, in response to whatever I say, you are to not use anything other than[aiueo]to back-channel."^[5]

"I can't use anything other than[aiueo]to back-channel?"

Just how would that end up becoming training for my tone of voice?

"You don't seem to know what's going on. Using nothing but aiueo, means being unable to say anything except [Ah]or[Ou]or[Eh?]and so on. Get it?"

"Well, I suppose so.....Ah, is now still fine?"

"Now is still fine. One more thing. When your speech is restricted in that way, do you know what ends up happening? In that situation, if you wanted to try conveying your thoughts to the other party, what would normally happen?"

".....Ah—, I see."

"Things like facial expression or intonation, loudness of voice or body movements, you wouldn't be able to avoid using them to express your feelings, right?"

".....That'd certainly be the case, huh."

"Basically, you see,"

Upon which, Hinami firstly knitted her eyebrows with a scary expression on her face, saying "Ah?".

Next, with an expression that made it seem like she had made a discovery, she rounded her eyes with an"Ah-".

After that, with a kind of, *I see*~, slightly idiotic face,"Ah~".

To conclude, she hugged her head with both hands, and raised her voice with an"AH—!".

".....So, as you can see, there's a lot of expressions that go along with just[Ah]. If you can acquire the habit of conveying your feelings in the same way like I did just now, through use of intonation, gestures, facial expressions, volume and the like, all that murmuring will be resolved."

".....Quite ingenious."

My first impression was of her excessively high acting ability. Next, her gorgeousness, or rather, how each action was very cute.

"In this kind of way, when you've restricted your speech, you have no choice

but to use other means to express your feelings, so you'll naturally progress in time. To put it another way, one could also say that the you up until now, as a consequence of all that word usage, has seen a decline in the quality of your means of expression *other* than words."

".....I think I've got the gist of it now."

"Alright. Then, it starts from now. Remember that it's fine when *you're* doing the talking. The restriction *only* applies to your back-channeling."

First of all, to sort of mark the start of things, how about a back-channel from the aiueo range.....

"Ou!"With great vigor, as I clenched a fist next to my face.

"Assertive from the get-go, aren't you. You might be surprisingly good at this?"

I was praised.....therefore.

".....iiyaaay!"while banzai-ing. ^[6] I had given it quite some thought, but nothing else had come to mind.

"That's *good*. Just like an idiot. I'd been expecting you to find it embarrassing at first and not do anything aside from small movements."

I was dissed. So in order to express this feeling of "You trying to mess with me?!"on the outside.....

"*Aah?*"I knitted my eyebrows and back-channeled discontentedly.

"Just like a fish in water, aren't you. I took a little bit of offence to that. However, how is it? Don't you think this is good training? As thanks, why don't you pay for today's lunch?"

To express this "No no no wait wait!"feeling.....

"Oi!!"I stuck a hand out in front as if making a retort. Just after I had said this.

"Thank you for waiting! Here's your Wafuu Sauce Cheese-in-Hamburg.....huh? Tomozaki, kun?"

In what was a surprise attack, the waitress had called me by name.

"*EH!?*"I answered with the same amount of energy that I had been using up to

that point. When I took a look at the face of the person who had brought over the Hamburg steak, standing there was a female whose setting was one part picture book and one part shoujo manga, possessing a glowing aura for added effect, in other words, our classmate Kikuchi Fuuka-san. The one I had locked eyes with even as I had blown my nose. Right now she was wearing glasses, something that wasn't part of her usual getup. They suited her way too much.

"Uo!?"In accordance with the essentials from earlier, I unconsciously ended up answering in the aiueo format.

"Huuuh? Fuuka-chan!? Ehh—! So you were working here! What a coincidence!"

Yet another classmate!? or so I had thought, but it was just Hinami. The sudden transformation was incredible.

"Yes, I am.Ever since about a week ago, because, this place, I'd heard good things about it....."

"It's been quite a hot topic at school lately, hasn't it! Even I, you know, wanted to try eating here once, so I came here for the first time today."

"Yeah!"I said, with the aftereffects from my earlier over-exaggerated gestures still in operation.



"Ah.....that's the case, isn't it..... But, why.....?"

"Eh? Why *what*?"

So said Hinami, *despite* her probably already knowing *full* well what the question meant, all the while preventing even the slightest of telltale signs from showing on her face. Kikuchi-san, in a manner very much like her that I could only see as belonging to a fairy, with mysterious eyes, alternated her gaze between myself and Hinami.

".....The two of you, have a pretty good relationship..... That's kind of, unexpected....."

"That's right! We started getting along after that recent Home Economics Class incident, you know." came Hinami's immediate reply. So good with the lies.

".....Ahh, *that* time."

fufu, laughed Kikuchi-san, the long eyelashes behind her glasses, swaying enchantingly.

"Ah, sorry, this one's mine!"

Hinami pointed at the Hamburg steak that Kikuchi-san had brought.

"Ah, yes, that's right..... Well then, please.....enjoy."

Saying such a thing and laughing elegantly, Kikuchi-san was, for the forest-like atmosphere of this shop, an immensely perfect match.

".....Has she gone?"

"Yes."

"How should I put this.....we weren't found out, were we? In various ways."

Hinami stayed silent for just a moment.

"Well, it should be fine. Supposing that even just a split second of my tone of voice was overheard, it probably wouldn't have appeared to be anything but some kind of messing around, and anyway I'm not careless enough to let our conversation be overheard for a long period of time. Due to this place's reputation at school, I had already considered the possibility that there would be a classmate among the customers."

"Ah, is that so." I hadn't considered it at all. Such was the dignity of a communicationally challenged.

"However, finding one among the staff was slightly surprising. I hadn't been on guard for that, so my reaction was slightly delayed. She was even wearing glasses..... but now that I *do* know, it's totally fine. I won't be making any blunders."

.....If this person said so, I guess it had to be the case.

"However, it's become a bit troublesome to carry on, hasn't it. Well, if it was just *any* classmate then continuing with the back-channeling training would also be fine..... However, it being *Kikuchi Fuuka* has changed the whole story....."

".....What do you mean by that? Just *any* classmate?"

Did Kikuchi-san have some sort of special position?

"Yes, well, during your recent put-into-practice episodes, I was thinking, just *maybe*—but today's reaction sealed the deal."

"Sealed the deal? For what?"

In response to my inquiry, Hinami, with a fearless smile, declared the following.

"Kikuchi Fuuka. That girl will be your first [Target Heroine]."

Translator Notes:

[1] Yes, that's not a typo. In the original he says subimasen instead of sumimasen.

[2] This is probably supposed to be some joke to do with Saitama prefecture. Just so you know, apparently it really does exist:

(<http://vivasaitama.com/sakitama-riceball/>). As for why Sakitama and not Saitama, well that's also explained on that page, but there's some history behind the name in that literature during the Heian period refers to it as 前玉 rather than the modern day name 埼玉.

[3] In case of any confusion later on, please note that it doesn't always come

in a bread bun. In this context it refers to a Hamburg Steak.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamburg_steak

[4] Wafuu (和風) literally means Japanese Style. Just like how Wagyu (和牛) literally means Japanese beef. Now you can show off the next time you encounter these things.

[5] <https://www.eslbase.com/tefl-a-z/back-channelling>

The actual term used here is 相槌, which refers to the the short things you say in conversation to show you're paying attention, like Hm/Oh/Yeah/Right, just so you know. Back-channeling probably isn't a very common word, and originally interjection was used as a translation here, but in the end for better flow of translation later on in the volume we'll be using "back-channel" here.

[6] *Banzai!!* (Remember to raise *both* arms high up when you do the banzai call)

Part 3

Shortly thereafter, Kikuchi-san brought over the Tomato Cheese Hamburg. Naturally, I couldn't look directly at her face, but even prior to that, my thoughts had been very disordered.

"W-w-wait a minute! By that, just... just what do you mean!?"

"Judging from your agitated movements, I believe what you're thinking is exactly correct."

Hinami spoke elegantly as she tilted her mug.

"S-s-s-so basically, this is about getting me to *d-d-date* Kikuchi-san, you mean!?"

I was getting pretty worked up, but since it wasn't a situation where I could afford to use a loud voice, I spoke in a strangely energetic way.

"That's exactly right. The medium-sized goal, to get a girlfriend within the second year of high school. The target will be that girl, you know?"

Hinami spoke indifferently, probably on purpose. She was clearly teasing my agitated self.

However, I didn't know where to start asking from, or what to say, so for starters, "*W-wh-why?*", I incoherently asked her for the reason.

"Well, there are a couple of reasons..."

As she said this, she put some of the hamburg steak into her mouth, slowly chewed, and swallowed. *Clearly* teasing me on purpose.

"The number one reason is that, of the four people you've talked to, she's the most hopeful."

"Hopeful?"

Kikuchi-san is? For *me*?

"Half."

In response to this unexpected word, I let out a confused "Eh?".

"The *hamburg!*"

"A, ahh."

She wouldn't continue talking. Was she going that far to tease me? Or else did she just really want to eat the hamburg steak? To get things moving, I exchanged half of my hamburg with half of hers.

"I don't know what kind of reason there was behind it, but look, there was that time when you started up a conversation with Yuzu, right? At that time, there was a glimpse of it. "Having said this, she pointed at my nose. "When Yuzu asked Fuuka-chan[bring any tissues?], her response was *much* faster than expected, right?"

"Aah, now that you mention it..... that's true, isn't it.Still, *so what?*"

"You see, at *that* time, when you asked Yuzu if she had any tissues, Fuuka-chan had *already* started looking for tissues. Even though she had just happened to overhear it."

"Heeh....."I hadn't realized.".....eh, just because of that?"

"Not quite. That was just a glimpse. Well, I *did* think afterwards that it was a bit unnatural, but there was still the possibility that she's just a girl who's kind to everyone, and that action wasn't necessarily a sign of favouring you. You could say that I only found out that she doesn't particularly hate you or anything."

"That's true. Then, why?"

"Well, you see."As she spoke, Hinami pointed to her own Cheese-in-Hamburg."When she brought this, she recognized us, right? Do you remember what she said at that time?"

"Eh.....? Did she say something important?"

"Yes. She said exactly this —[Huh? Tomozaki-kun?]."

Hinami pointed at me yet again, speaking in a way that indicated everything was in place and she was waiting for me to make the connection.

".....Eh? So what? I mean, if you ran into a classmate, you'd at the very least call their name, right?"

Hinami let out a sigh, and then, placed a hand on her chest.

"Even though [*Hinami Aoi*] was also there?"

".....Ah—. I get it now."

I had understood. I *understood*, but I was also once again impressed by this person's self-confidence being used as the premise.

"At our school, I'm an existence who's something like a celebrity. Moreover, the type that's easy to get along with. Thus, normally, if someone were to coincidentally see a group of classmates with myself in it, they would, without a doubt, call out *my* name first. However, in *her* case, she first said [Tomozaki-kun?], right. While it might not *seem* like a big deal, that's quite the conclusive event."

Hinami had an extremely serious face. The fact that I had gotten used to her extreme self-confidence was scary.

"Wait, to *that* extent?"

"Yes, to *that* extent. Try thinking for a bit. Even if it's not someone who's such a big celebrity like me, if you find a boy and a girl together and you're a girl, no matter how you look at it, the one you'd find easier to call out to at the beginning is the *girl*, right? In that situation, what do you think calling the *boy's* name first means?"

"That's.....certainly true."

"The fact that she called out your name in spite of that, is actually pretty unnatural if you consider what would be normal. Of course, if she didn't notice anyone *but* you, that would be another story, but not noticing someone like me, it's just not possible. Therefore, this means that *either* there is to a degree, some hope, *or*, Fuuka-chan's sense for such situations is extremely abnormal, one of those two."

As she said that, Hinami finished eating her hamburg.

"Is it really alright to rule out the fact that she might have not noticed you?"

Ignoring my words, Hinami continued.

"However, from what I know, she's a normal girl..... which means that there's

probably some hope..... Hey, do you recall having done anything?"

"Something I did?" I tried recalling a lot of things, but..."No, not at all."

".....I see." She made a troubled face. "Then, perhaps it's a misunderstanding after all.....?"

Hinami's tone of voice was unusually lacking in confidence.

"However, supposing it really is a misunderstanding, wouldn't it better to give up on her being a target heroine?"

"That's not true." Flat out denial. "Misunderstanding or not, she's the most suitable girl for you right now. Even if it *were* a misunderstanding, your target heroine would still be her."

"B-but, in the first place, isn't there also the matter of whether I like her or not?"

In the first place, I had some resistance there.

".....Don't you think she's cute?"

"Eh?"

Hinami suddenly asked a completely unexpected question.

"Fuuka-chan. I think she's really cute, but how about you?"

".....Err, well..... I do think she's cute."

"Right? Then isn't it fine? You still don't know whether you like her or not. However, she's cute, so you're a little interested. Which is why, you're going to try going on the offensive for a bit. From there, you'll try and find out whether you really like her not.Is there anything strange about that?"

"Err, well, if you put it that way, then....."

"It isn't something where you should care about every little detail, this kind of thing."

No, even if you say *this kind of thing*. Was this really something that trivial? I was quite troubled. My thoughts of how unfaithful it might be, or the fear of approaching her in the first place. Also, the obstinacy of being a gamer. They were all interlaced with each other. And then.

".....This game, I made the decision to try playing it seriously. I'll do it. "

I said that. It was something I had already resolved myself to do. The parts that needed thought, well, it should be alright to just take my chances and think about them later. Something too late to fix wouldn't suddenly happen. Probably.

"I see. As expected, huh."Hinami picked up the menu as she said this.

"Are you ordering something? A dessert?"

"Yes. Why don't you order something too? It seems like the cake here is really good."

"Heeh."I took a quick look at a the menu."Then, I'll have tiramisu."

"I'll have chee-....."That was as far as she got before Hinami broke off mid-sentence, her face turning red.

"Chee?"

When I repeated my question, Hinami's expression turned really, *really* calm. Unnaturally so. Or rather, it was obvious that she was faking the expression. And then, just like that, with a tranquil tone of voice that was every bit as artificial as her facial expression, she said the following.

"I'll have cheese cake."

I once again inadvertently let out a burst of laughter, earning myself a kick under the table.

At the hair salon we went to next, things proceeded smoothly without particular incident. I only said"I'll leave it to you. Anything normal-looking.", completing the mission in this way by entrusting everything to the barber. Since I had also been told to get my eyebrows cut, I requested that as well. Having already gone through *that* kind of experience at the clothes shop, at this point I had already stopped caring, and was just going with the flow. The total came to 4,800 yen, which was 3,800 yen more expensive than usual. ^[1] Looking in the mirror, the impression I got was that my unattractive face was paired with a hairstyle more stylish than usual. Hooo ray. How sad.

In this way, on this Saturday, after learning how to pick out clothes, how to

ask for haircuts and eyebrow cuts, and how to practice speaking, we parted ways in the evening.

And then after I got home, for the first time, I finally got a small reaction from this[Game].

"I'm home～"

I was more tired than usual, so after taking off my shoes, leaving them untidied, I rushed into the living room. My parents weren't at home, but my sister was there wearing, what were they called, *hotpants?*, lying on the sofa exposing her thighs like a fool.

".....Hey, your appearance is way too sloppy."

I candidly pointed this out. Upon which my sister, without looking in my direction,

"Haa!? You're the last person I want to hear that from, Onii-chan! Wearing that strange....."while saying that, she turned her head to look at me.".....Eh?"

And then, clearly bewildered, as if she had witnessed something impossible, her eyes grew round. She carefully looked at me from head to toe.

".....Onii-chan.....did you perhaps....."

Th-this is!

Translator Notes:

[1] This means that he usually gets his haircut at a 1,000 yen shop.

<https://matcha-jp.com/en/2524>

Part 4

"Hinami! *Hinami!*"

The following Monday morning. I excitedly rushed over to Hinami, who had reached the second Sewing Room first.

".....Can you stop that? You're acting like a gross dog."

"No no, there wasn't any need for gross in that comparison. It's subjective!"

"Just *what* is going on? Such a cheerful tsukkomi this early in the morning."

I then made a grand declaration.

"The first [Small goal], I might have already cleared it!"

When I said this, Hinami's eyes lit up.

"Eh, *really!*? Was it your family? They said something to you?"

Her eyes were clearly shining. That kind of made me happy too.

"Yeah, it was my sister! Listen to this, will you! And then tell me if it meets the clear condition or not!"

"Sure, alright. It definitely wasn't a misunderstanding, right?"

"Yeah! Probably!"

"So, what did she say?"

"About that....."

I was in the right mood for a drum-roll.

"[.....Onii-chan.....did you perhaps..... This, this kind of change definitely wouldn't be possible with Onii-chan's sense of clothing alone, right?Huh? Could it be, out of awareness for females, you read an Escape Otaku-ism book or something?], like that!"

Hinami made a face that was kind of one of bewilderment and kind of like a wry smile, as she tried to find the right words.

".....Yes, that *does* count as a clear, but..... To think that you could get this

delighted from a remark like that..... you know?"

"Be quiet! A clear is a clear!"

"Well, whatever. Congratulations on achieving the first goal. Quite admirable."

"T, thanks." I said in confusion.

"—You might be thinking something like, *I haven't done anything myself, though*, but that's not the case. It's true that your clothes were just copied from the mannequin and your hairstyle was decided by the barber. However, motivating yourself to do things, having a cooperative mindset when going along with me, and working hard every day to improve your facial expression and posture, all of those things are showing considerable results. Even though it wasn't only through your abilities alone, however, this is definitely a result that *you, by yourself*, with your *own* hands, grabbed hold of."

While looking straight into my eyes, Hinami easily put into words the slight sense of incongruity I felt deep inside my heart.

"Because of that, I'll say it again. — Congratulations."

".....Ah, thanks."

Having having heard all that, the second time I said thanks, I was able to say it a little more sincerely. I see, so I, in this game called life, have accomplished one of the goals, huh.

"Well then." Without any regard for my lingering thoughts, Hinami smoothly transitioned to the next topic of discussion. "I'll reveal the next small goal."

"Uh, that was quick."

"Of course. In order to get results, it's important to keep doing something every day. There's no way other than to steadily move forward."

"Well, I know that, but..."

"Then, I'll be telling you what it is now. The next goal, it's *also* very simple."

I hadn't even been granted enough time to gulp down my saliva.

"[With a girl in our school who is *not* me, you are to go hang out somewhere,

just the two of you.]"

"Wait a second!"

I instinctively reached a hand out to stop her.

".....What now? Another irrelevant argument that brings up how unpopular and uncool you are?"

"It's not that! I mean, it's strange, isn't it, that goal!"

"Which part?"

"I mean, look, a boy going out alone with a girl, doesn't that mean that they're pretty much dating each other!?"

Full of confidence, I shouted out a sound argument, but for some reason, Hinami gave me a look that implied she was exasperated from the bottom of her heart, or rather, it went past that, as if she was even pitying me out of kindness.

"Haah..... You know, I'd already made the assumption that you wouldn't have any love experience, but haven't you at least read any manga or watched any dramas with romantic elements?"

".....Uh, I have."

"Then you should understand, right? *A boy going out somewhere with a girl means they're dating*, that's not something even a middle schooler would say, you know?"

".....I-is that so?" I felt uneasy after having heard that.

"Yes it is. Well, it's true that in a lot of cases, people go out together as boy and girl to check if they're compatible enough to date or not, so by going out together, the possibility of dating more or less enters the picture."

"T-then...!" I hung onto the dangling thread of spider silk.

"You *still* have more to say?"

She was looking at me very, *very* sadly, and I was rapidly getting smaller and smaller.

"O, ou.....well, it's.....just as you said.....I guess?"

"Yes. Anyway, I'll have you work towards that goal. Well now, are you ready? For what I'm going to have you do for today."

Upon which, Hinami, in a way that made it seem only natural, continued with this.

"It's to start up a conversation with Izumi two or more times."

"Wait a second!"

This time I've definitely got her! ^[1] – with that kind of confidence, I stopped Hinami in her tracks.

"Could you please stop cutting in every single time?"

"No no no! This time it's *definitely* strange. Yesterday, didn't you just say that the target heroine would be Kikuchi Fuuka? Which means if I were to start a conversation, then it'd be Kikuchi Fuuka, *not* Izumi Yuzu, right!" I pointed this out vigorously, then quickly calmed down.".....Well, actually, I guess it was just a slip of the tongue."

I became embarrassed at so triumphantly raising a big fuss over a small slip of the tongue. *Maybe it was me trying to get even with her for my everyday decapitations.....* just as I was thinking this, Hinami said something unexpected.

"What are you saying? Isn't it more suitable for the one you approach to be *not* Kikuchi Fuuka, but Izumi Yuzu?"

"Hah?No way, stop being so stubborn, it was a slip of the tongue, right?"

".....*Excuse me, you do* know that I'm Hinami Aoi, right? Do you really think I would make something like a[*slip of the tongue*]?"

"Wait, so you never say something wrong by mistake?"

"Listen well. It's certainly true that the target heroine is Kikuchi Fuuka. But you know, the romance system in the game called Life differs from the normal dating sims."

".....What do you mean by that?"

With a "You see...", Hinami began her speech.

"In dating sims, once you've made up your mind on the target heroine, all

that's left is to simply continue picking the choices that would raise that girl's affection points, right until the conquest is complete."

"Aah, that's true."

"However, in reality, that won't do. There's no fixed route like that."

"Well that might be true, but still, why Izumi Yuzu?"

"For example, in shooting games."she began again."The situation where you've already used up your lives, and the situation where you have plenty of lives left.....in which case would you be able to play better?"

"Eh?"I hesitated for a moment."Well, I think it also depends on your personality but..... I think that for most people, on having no lives left, they'd feel nervous and be unable to play like normal. I'm also like that."

"Onitada."

"There it is."

"Normally, it's when you have lives left that you are able to play better."

".....And so, what of it?"

"Haah."The usual sigh."I am *saying*, that love is like that *too*."

"Uhh.....meaning?"

"Don't you understand? The situation of having only one girl that you might be able to date, such that if you failed to get together with her, you wouldn't have any *other* candidates, *that* is what you would call the situation where you don't have any lives left, isn't that right?"

"Guess so."

"Once you think about it like that, you then have a few girls you might be able to date, such that if you are unable to get together with one girl, then you have a few other candidates. That way, you would have more room to negotiate with your partner, correct?"

".....So it's like that."I might have *understood*, but."Basically this is like keeping her as *backup*, right? But come on Hinami, we're talking about *that* Izumi Yuzu, aren't we? That's obviously impossible. It's *me*, you know?"

In a rare occurrence, I made this assertion full of confidence.

"It's not like this is only about Izumi Yuzu, you know. It's about the fact that by having the mentality that it's better to be in that multiple-candidate situation, you'll be able to move more freely."

"But..... I mean, even so, isn't that being unfaithful?"

The act of keeping multiple people as backups, that is.

"You know, it's not like I'm telling you to lie to anyone, right? You're only making several female friends who might potentially develop into lovers, in order to create some breathing room for yourself."

"No, but, I mean, that's not being earnest....."

"Aaah, you're so annoying. You know, religious-like blind belief in words like[faithfulness]or[earnestness]that have no real substance but only focus on outside appearance, it's a predicament that distracts people from truly effective behavior, and it's because of *that*, that Japan lags behind other countries in international decision making."

"Somehow, the conversation suddenly reached an international level!?"Then, after a bit of thinking."But, if by doing that, Kikuchi-san's affection points were to drop, then wouldn't everything be for nothing?"

"It's not like that. Look, it's true that in normal dating sims, if you make choices which increase another girl's affection points, then the main girl's affection points will drop."

"Right?"

"But you know, *reality* is different. Instead, in reality it's[If you increase a girl's affection points, then other girls' affection points will also increase.]"

Uh, so in summary.....

".....You improve your reputation *among* the girls, is that how it is?"

"Well, putting it simply, that's correct. Other than that, you're stimulating the desire to possess, as well as making yourself look more desirable as a man. There's all *sorts* of benefits."

"Hmm, is that, so?..... Well, okay."

Either way, I didn't think that the current me would be able to increase my reputation among the girls, though.

".....Hm? Apart from that, am I not going to do anything with Kikuchi-san? Isn't she the main heroine?"

"Yes. You won't."Saying only this, Hinami then stopped talking.Well, she probably had some kind of plan.

".....Got it. However, I'll do it to an extent that I don't consider being unfaithful."

"You're free to do so. But having said that, you using some nonsensical reasoning to run away is a different story, alright?"

In *truth*, I was carelessly thinking something like, *But to begin with, situations that can be seen as being unfaithful aren't likely to happen with people who aren't very popular, and because of that, I still can't fathom a situation where it would happen to me, so it's probably fine*. But if I were to actually say such a thing, then she would end up giving me another "Are you motivated to do this or not?"kind of response, so I didn't say it.

"Understood. Thinking that way certainly seems more effective..... besides, if I don't at least act with such things in mind, it'll seem quite far off. Accomplishing the[Medium-sized goal], I mean."

Accomplishing that incredibly *unthinkable* goal of getting a girlfriend before advancing to third year, I mean.

"That's true."Hinami nodded."Properly affirming your goals like that is very important."

"Okay.....I'll try it."

"Well then, let's talk about how to start up your conversations with her."

"Ah, well, I've been memorizing the conversation topics and all that....."

When I said that, Hinami was lightly surprised, then smiled happily, saying,"In that case, I'll leave it to you."

Starting up a conversation with Izumi Yuzu twice. How should I put it, had it been the me up to now, at that point I would probably have given up, declaring it to be impossible, but, right now I had the feeling that this, *If I work hard at it like this, it might be possible* thing resembling a tiny bit of self-confidence was sprouting, and that felt kind of strange to me.

"Ah, by the way, it's for[every day]this week."

"EHH!?"

And then, that tiny bit of self-confidence was immediately snatched away.

Translator Notes:

[1] A literal translation of the original (今度こそ俺は完全にしっぽを捕まえたぞ！) is something like, *This time I've definitely caught the tail!*, something which probably only makes sense if you think of it as finally catching hold of the tail that elusive animal which keeps disappearing around corners. If that makes sense.

Chapter 5: When in possession of powerful skills and equipment, it is fun to smoothly advance in an unbelievable way

Part 1

On the Saturday on which I went out with Hinami, as well as the Sunday the next day, while keeping up with the usual training of my facial expression and posture, at the same time I thoroughly carried out the[Memorization of Topics]and[Practising Tone of Back-channels]that Hinami had taught me.

For the memorization of topics, I used the method I often employed for studying, using a red sheet to hide answers that I had written using a red pen. Memorizing dozens of topics that I had gone out of my way to come up with. For practising the tone of my back-channels, I didn't really have any conversation partners, and as for doing it with my mother and father..... there was no way I was going to have that kind of conversation with them, so I practised by using the tragic method of turning on the television and back-channeling to talk shows and such. That is, back-channeling in sync with the actors.

Here, I noticed something. Since I couldn't use anything except[aiueo], I had *intended* to exaggerate my back-channels, but the resulting tones of my back-channels didn't end up being very different from the ones made at the same time by the actors on television.

However, as a viewer watching them on television, I didn't really feel that the actors were exaggerating their back-channels.

—In other words, the tones that I felt were exaggerated, when viewed objectively, were actually natural tones. Conversely speaking, it meant that the way in which I had been back-channeling up until now had been pretty dull.

"Ahhhhhh! I really don't get it!"

As for myself throwing my chest out, tightening my mouth and saying that with an extremely cheerful tone of voice, it felt so *unlike* me, it was embarrassing.

—Which is why, I should be able to do various things better than the previous me could.

Monday, in the classroom.

"Hey, Izumi-san, did you do the English translation?"

It might have *sounded* casual, or rather, it would be great if it had sounded that way, but my heart was racing. On the way back from the second Sewing Room to the classroom, going, *gonna say it, gonna say it, gonna say it*, I had continuously pepped myself up, and as a result, I managed to say it soon after returning to my seat without there first being an unusually long pause. Naturally, the topic of English homework was among the ones that I had previously memorized.

"Eh? Huh, Tomozaki-kun? What? You didn't do it?"

Her surprised *Eh?* and *What?* clearly showed on her face, but it was inevitable since *I* was the one who had started the conversation.

"Ah, no, no, I did do it."

Izumi-san made a puzzled face. Today's me is different from usual, though!

"Eh, what's the matter then?"

Izumi drew her body back a bit and stared at me. Clearly on alert. Huh? Is this bad? No, wait, I should still be safe. After all, there's still my stock of memorized topics!

"Well, I mean, suddenly a weird name like McCosh Poody turned up, like, didn't you find that funny?" I said this with the most natural tone of voice and facial expression that I could manage.

"Makkos.....? Sorry, what? I don't get what you mean. Rather, I haven't done the translation yet, so....."

.....Uhhh. Well then, what to do. Huh? What other topics did I memorize? Wait just a moment. Eh? Uhhh. I was supposed to have around 10 topics left. Huh? My head's completely blank.....

My initial hollow composure was blown away without a trace, and only my abnormally fast heartbeat remained.

"Ah, is that so!" I had intended to say this in a bright tone of voice, but since I said it in a hurry, I wonder how it turned out.

"Yeah. Actually, what's up, all of a sudden? Is that all?"

"Ah, yeah, sorry." I didn't feel like I was able to maintain a bright tone at all at.

"I don't really mind.....eh, can I go now?"

"Ah, well....."

"Hn ? "

"Err.....ah, nevermind, it's.....nothing."

After confirming from my lifeless words that it was fine to leave, Izumi-san tilted her head, then quickly moved towards the area in the back of the classroom near the windows, the zone where the riajuu would always gather.

Eh?

— I had thought that I would be able to do it if I tried hard, but in the end, I hadn't managed to do it at all. Hahahahaha. What's *with* that? Actually, then again. Of *course* it'd be like this. It's *me*, after all. Just *what* was I doing misunderstanding the situation here. I was getting carried away, wasn't I. This was the best I could manage. It's always been that way, hasn't it. *Can't do it, can't do it, impossible, it's impossible*. As expected. It's too early for me to put into practice, Hinami.

I, who had suffered a complete loss of my self-confidence and will to fight, couldn't concentrate on the lessons at all. *What's she going to say to me during the after-school evaluation session? What should I say?* Those were the only two thoughts that filled my head. However, as if to say to me, *Like I care*, when I got back from going to the toilet during the break between second and third period, written on the handout I had left on top of my desk was the following short note.

["TWO\ times a day.]

Seriously..... Hinami-san. You want me to go through that hell a second time.....?

"Fuu— ! "[1]

I had wavered for a moment because of my smashed-up self-confidence, but by forcibly starting up my, since it's something I myself decided to do, there's

no way but to do it, hating-to-lose way of thinking that I had cultivated in AtaFami and the other games, I re-ignited my fighting spirit. *If I lose here, then I will have lost to myself.* *Pachin*. I struck my face with both hands. I'll do what I've decided to do, I'll do what I've decided to do. Not-doing is reserved for when I've concluded that this is a kusoge and discontinued everything. But until then.

After all, she's not the main heroine and our relationship is pretty weak in the first place, so it doesn't matter what she thinks! That's why, it's fine! Even if things turn weird, it'll only be a temporary embarrassment! It's all right!

While making those kinds of self-suggestions, I searched for the right timing, but, the break after the third period, the lunch break, and the break after the fifth period, I'd already missed those three chances I could have used to talk to her.

It would be one thing if it were physically impossible. However, having chances but letting them escape due to my fear was just nonsense. I couldn't just brush it off with an oops. I had to use this fighting spirit to make my body move somehow.

And so, after school, immediately after the ending salutations. If I missed this chance, then Izumi Yuzu would once again move to her usual position at the back of the classroom near the windows, group up with all the riajuu and go home. This was literally the last chance. I still had some topics memorized. If it's like this, it, *shouldn't* be unnatural, I think. It'll be fine!

I took a breath. Then, squeezed out the words.

"Hey, Izumi-san."

—In a voice so quiet, only I could hear it.

Naturally, there was no way that Izumi Yuzu could have noticed words that were spoken so silently, so she joined her usual group and went back home.

"Well, the very fact that you came here is admirable."

After school, in the second Sewing Room. As if she had seen through my feelings, that was what Hinami said to me.

".....I'm terribly sorry."

I said this sincerely. I considered it inexcusable from the bottom of my heart. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I was crestfallen.

"If I were your *friend*, this is where I would offer you some kind, soothing words." Since I was feeling down, I couldn't see her face. "However, I am in the position of being your *guide*. Even if I *were* your friend, it would be as a comrade-in-arms. Because of that, I'll be guiding you until the very end."

I wholly agreed with every single word of that.

"Today's evaluation session will be brief. There's only two things I want to say."

"Only two?"

"Yes. Firstly.[It's over if you get complacent. It's also over if you give excuses. Reflect on that.]"

Hinami had said this with a relentless glint in her eyes.

".....U, Understood!"

Her words echoed greatly in my heart.

"And, secondly.[From tomorrow onwards, continue trying your best in the same manner.]"

".....Eh ? "

"How you performed today is within my expectations. I had already considered that the possibility of things turning out like this when I gave you the task. That's why, there's no problem. You'll be able to grow from it. However, make sure to bear in mind that fulfilling the twice per day quota is *possible*. That is all. Alright?"

"Within your expectations?"

"Yes. Which is why, make sure to complete the task without fail from tomorrow onwards."

"But.....to be honest, I'm not confident that I'll be able to start up a conversation with her again.....even the topic I prepared, it ended up in failure."

"What happened today was just a coincidence. Since Yuzu coincidentally didn't do the translation, things didn't work out the way they should have, but as a conversation topic, what you said wasn't that bad, and the way you said it and your facial expression were both, well, passable. Just barely, mind you."

"Is, is that so?"

"Yes."

"But, I don't even know if the topics I prepare for next time will be okay or not....."

"You're overthinking it. *Anything* works as a conversation topic. If you *really* can't come up with one, then talk about your conversation partner's facial expression, or hairstyle. Basically anything[about the other person]and it'll work out somehow. Anyway, anything works."

"Is, is that so.....?"

"Yes. So you continue in that same manner tomorrow, there's a high probability that you'll be able to strike up a normal conversation."

".....But"

"Will you stop it, I'm tired of your *buts* already! Listen up. About the word[but], it's not something you should use as part of an excuse to run away, but instead, something you use to suggest a way to change a situation of compromise for the better. Have I ever said anything wrong? Stop worrying, just shut up and do it."

Suddenly, she grabbed my butt.

"*Waaah!?*"

"The fact that you're properly training your body posture even though you're in the middle of being lectured like this is undeniable evidence that you're putting in the effort. Okay? I'm not saying that *all* effort will be rewarded, but if it's effort put in toward goals like this which aren't too difficult, as long as they do things correctly, *anyone* will be rewarded for it, without fail."

"Hinami....."

You're actually.....

".....What now? You're spacing out. At any rate, you're thinking about something irrelevant again, aren't you? If you have the time to be doing that, then you should be reflecting on what's happened so far or thinking about what to do next. You're full of more problems than you think, you know. It's almost like you're a blockhead who's equipped an item that's cursed with poison and confusion."

Actually a kind person..... is what I had been about to think. That was close.

And then, the next day. Since *Hinami* had said so, it was probably true that if I were to *start up* a conversation just as I did before, the possibility of successfully *establishing* a conversation would be quite high. Or rather, she was right.[Establishing a conversation]itself wasn't something that difficult. Even I could more or less hold a conversation with my family, and with Hinami too. I'd somehow managed to do it with Mimimi as well. Which meant that, in summary, provided I have a topic and can talk normally, I can manage just fine, so all that's left here is an issue of courage.....I think.

Yesterday, after returning home feeling down, I had sent a mail to Hinami asking her about things such as Izumi Yuzu's circle of friends. From that, I had added around 10 more topics and perfectly memorized them. I had paid special attention to make sure that I could still recall them even in a panic. *With this much, it should be fine.....* I wanted to believe that.

I couldn't find the right timing during the morning homeroom, but after first period ended, an opportunity presented itself.

Please work out somehow!

"Hey, Izumi-san."

Izumi Yuzu looked my way. Having made sure of this, I exaggeratedly — though from an observer's point of view, it probably didn't seem exaggerated — suppressed my breathing and said the following.

"Say, about Nakamura, does it look like he's still angry at me?"

"Eh?" Izumi-san, confused for a second, immediately suppressed her breathing as well, then with a light laugh, said *this*. "Ahaha, what's with that, why are you asking *me*?"

Seeing her carefree smile, I got a bit less nervous, and quickly gave her my reply.

"Eh..... well, I heard that you're close to Nakamura."

"What's with that? Who said that?"

"Err."Perhaps I should tell her honestly."Hinami."

We talked while lowering our voices. I couldn't really express tones while whispering, so I concentrated on my facial expressions.

"Ah—. You know, Tomozaki-kun, don't you seem to be getting along pretty well with Aoi lately? Hey, what's this, have you got something going on!?"

"N-no, there's absolutely nothing!"

"Fuuu, *really*~?"She seemed suspicious."Well, whatever. Anyway, um. *Is Shuuji angry*, was it?"

"That's right."

"About that. Rather than being *angry*, it feels like he's frustrated."

"Frustrated?"I spoke while frowning in a way that was apparent.

"Yeah, frustrated. He's practising *really* hard now you know, to get better at that AtaFami game. To the point that it's gross."

While thinking, *Is that so?* in surprise, I also thought, *So practising AtaFami is gross?*, taking damage.

"Heeh. So that's how it is."Then, I remembered one of the topics I had memorized. "Actually, after winning against Nakamura in that AtaFami match, I thought that I'd definitely be bullied in class."

"What's *with* that? *Really*?"She laughed while keeping her breath down."That's bad."

"Yeah, so, I'm worried about what's going to happen next."

"You're worrying too much! It won't turn into that, you'll be fine, probably."

"Ah, really? Then that's great."I spoke with an exaggeratedly relieved tone and facial expression.

"Ahaha, good for you."

"Yeah."

All right! I'll be fine with this! I made it! I made it to the end! The conversation felt like it had already ended, and if I pushed it any further, it was possible for me to make a mistake, so I decided to retreat for now. It was two times per day, so until the end of Friday, seven more times to go. *Don't push yourself, don't push yourself.*

In this kind of way, for the next seven times as well, which were at times disorderly, and at other times awkward, I managed to survive with just my fighting spirit. Well, to be honest, the conversation we'd had about Nakamura was the longest time a conversation lasted, with the others kind of being on the level of seven consecutive instances of *I talked to her so we had a conversation*, which were, frankly, near the failing mark. Three or four of those were probably actual fails. If the conversation "Hey, Izumi-san, is that a new cardigan?" "Eh? It's the same as yesterday....." "Ah, so I was imagining it." "Y, yeah." "....." "....." didn't count as a fail, then three times. Well, a passing mark overall, perhaps? Hahahaha. Haah. This is the worst.

"A passing mark."

"*Seriously?*"

At the second Sewing room. Since I hadn't *actually* been expecting a passing mark, that surprised me.

"Well, really, you passed in the sense that you were able to properly carry out the task of starting up a conversation twice a day."

".....Is that so? You mean it's not a problem even if I failed the conversation itself?"

"That's correct." I now suddenly realized something.

"In other words.....it was a test to see if I had the courage to start a conversation, was it!"

"Incorrect."

"Huh.....? Then, then what was it about?"

When I said this, Hinami made the peace sign with her fingers and said the following. [2]

"You know the concept of *Game Over*, right? There's two types, do you know them?"

"Again so suddenly. [3] Two types of *Game Over*?What's with that? I don't get it."

"Well, basically." As she spoke, she opened each hand in succession, with the palms facing upwards. "The kind where you're forced to redo everything starting from the last time you saved, and the kind where you get to keep your state from the point before you died and retry from there." [4]

"Ah, I see. It's true that it differs based on the game.However, how is that relevant?"

"*This* time round, you had that conversation with Yuzu, right. That was, so to say, a battle with the enemy. You failed and were defeated, resulting in *Game Over*."

"Ah, so it really was a failure."

"Obviously. A conversation with three back-and-forth exchanges doesn't count as a conversation, you know."

".....Y, yeah, I thought as much."

"Now then. For the battle called having a conversation, do you know which kind of *Game Over* applies?"

".....Well, it has to be the kind where you get to keep your state and continue."

"Yes! Because there's no such thing as a save point in life, right. *However*, even if you lose, you don't end up having the money in your inventory halved or anything like that. There's no penalty to losing a battle. So it's more advantageous for you to take fights continuously one after the other. Besides, if you keep on fighting so many times, you might eventually get lucky and win, right?"

".....Well, since you put it that way, I guess so?"

"However. That's not the *really* important bit. Understand? The *Game Over* of[Life]has just one characteristic that makes it *completely* different from all other games.Do you know what it is?"

She looked into my eyes while grinning.

"Even if you ask me that.....there's too much to consider, I don't know what to think."

When I expressed my worry to her, Hinami, beginning with a "*You see.....*", slowly said the following.

"In[Life], you gain experience not when you *win* battles, but when you *lose* them."

".....Whoa."

This turned into some good conversation.

"So for this week, you persistently fought a strong enemy named Izumi Yuzu and piled up defeats. However, those defeats became experience points and accumulated within you. In addition, during the battles, you gave this and that a lot of thought, like whether something was better to do his way, or better to do that way, right?"

"Well, yes."Her trust in me when it came to that was slightly uplifting.

"Although, frankly, I think you probably gave the impression of[That guy who tried to talk to me in a kind of weird way]to Izumi Yuzu."

"Ah, so it really *was* like that, huh?"

"But you also gained a lot more than that. You've also realized it yourself, haven't you? The fact that by the second half, you lost your nervousness, and were more proficient at it."

"Well.....I guess that's true."

Certainly, although I hadn't been able to keep the conversations going for a very long time, it was *especially* the case for each of the two times in the second half that I felt, how should I say, that the[grossness]that I had constantly been releasing since the instant of my leaving the birth canal had almost disappeared. Although me being the one saying this was a bit, well.

"So with that, this week's task of [Gaining experience points from getting defeated] is now over.Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"Ah, now that you've asked."There was one."You said something about Kikuchi-san favouring me, right?"

"Yes, I *did* say that, didn't I. And?"

"Well, I don't think it's to the point of *favouring*.....but I've figured out the reason for it."

Hinami moved her body towards me without a shred of hesitation. *Close, too close. It's bad for my heart, so please stop that.*

"What do you mean?"

She was frowning, but her eyes were shining with something that looked like anticipation.

Translator Notes:

[1] He's probably exhaling here to calm himself down. Even though his situation might incline you to read it as an abruptly terminated expletive, please read it as *foo*. Phonetic readings, okay? Phonetic readings.

[2] For the peace sign, you hold up your index finger and middle finger, keeping them apart. That is, two fingers. It's also known as the 'V' sign (for victory), but it has been used (for example, by John Lennon of the Beatles) to denote peace, and that's the main interpretation which appears to have stuck in Japan.

[3] He's referring to her tendency to suddenly switch to a gaming context in conversation.

[4] For example, Final Fantasy (Type 1) and Pokémon (Type 2).

Part 2

It had been fourth period on Friday. Just one more time to go before fulfilling the quota for conversations with Izumi Yuzu.

Since I had by this point been talking to her over and over again, I had somehow become used to it, or rather, I had become numb to the feeling, such that even if a conversation didn't last, I was able to end up thinking something like, *Again, huh*, that kind of indifference. I had come to be set free from my panic.

Which is why I had been in a complacent state of mind, resembling, *In any case, one more to go, if I find the right timing somewhere then I should be able to get it done without having to take it too seriously*. On account of having been in that complacent state of mind, when the time came to move classes, I had been able to behave in the same way I usually did, killing some time in the library first before making my way towards the next classroom at the last moment. Although, instead of my usual studying of AtaFami tactics as I pretended to read a book or something, *just for today*, reviewing my memorized conversation topics was the kind of thing I had intended to devote myself to.

—It was at that time.

"Tomozaki-kun."

"*Whoa!?*"

Suddenly, my name was called in a terrifyingly transparent voice. When I turned towards the direction of that voice, holding a book with both hands while peering into my face was an angel of light. I mean, Kikuchi Fuuka-san.

".....Huh? Kikuchi-san? Why are you *here*?"

"Even if you ask why, I'm just here as always, though.....?"

".....As always?"

Just what might she mean, I wonder. I tried to recall anything that she could possibly be referring to, but with my brain being gently swayed by the aroma

departing Kikuchi-san that resembled a field of alpine flowers in paradise, it just wasn't possible.

"I mean.....when moving class, it's always, Tomozaki-kun and, me, isn't it.....?"

"Umm.....when we're moving class, *always*?"

"Ah.....could it be.....you never noticed?"

Which meant.

".....Ahh, so in other words."

"Whenever it's time for our class to move, you're always here, right..... ? "

"Y, yeah."

"I've always been doing the same as well, so.....*Ah, you're here again*, I would think....."

"Ah, is that so? Sorry, I was concentrating, so....."

Concentrating on my study of AtaFami tactics, that is. When I looked at her, Kikuchi-san's gaze was focused on my open book.

".....Michael Andy's works, you like them, don't you..... ? "

"Eh?"

"Huh.....? Was I mistaken? You were always reading them, so....."

Ahh, that's right, the book that I was always pretending to read. In the library, with my choice of seat being, for whatever reason, predetermined, I would always, from there, pick up a book from the end of the nearest bookshelf, so it might have ended up being this one every single time.However, not knowing whether or not it would be a good idea to explain that fact, I ended up saying the following.

"Ahh, well, I guess. Look, I don't *particularly* love them or anything, though....."

Right, now what. In the hope that I would be able to gain a vague understanding of the book's contents and somehow survive this situation, I tried shifting my attention to the contents of the open book for the first time ever, but what came into view was the conversation text"Ebi Daite!"Mouzun

Rekuku!", which, on top of resembling a ridiculously ambiguous code, were *two* in number, making me realize that it would be impossible with such hasty preparation.

"As I thought.....!" Kikuchi-san's eyes, which were sparkling with magical power as always to begin with, began to sparkle even more. "Me too, I really love Andy's works.....!"

"Ah, is, is that so." *This is bad, now what.* "Wh, what a coincidence, huh....."

"Yes! A huge coincidence!"

Kikuchi-san gently brought her hands together in front of her lips.

"Don't you think this resembles [Poporu and Bird of Prey Island].....!?"

"Eh? Bird of Prey.....?"

"By Andy.....ah, have you not read it yet.....? Ah, that's right, the library doesn't have it....."

"Eh? Ah, yeah, that one! Uh, look, see, I've wanted to read that but it was quite difficult to..... you know? Ahaha."

When I tried to gloss over the matter, Kikuchi-san, as if having doubled her magical power with a droplet from the spirits, made her eyes sparkle with even more intensity.

"Yes! Quite difficult to find!"

"Eh?"

"That book, there haven't been any reprints of it ever since the translation of the first one came out twenty years ago, so it's surprisingly hard to find in stock, isn't it, even though it's one of his defining works.....! Even though they should stock more of it!"

With even [I haven't read it] only serving to increase her enthusiasm even further, I had lost my only way out.

"Eh? Ah, y, yeah! That's true isn't it, ahaha....."

"Ah, um....." Then, Kikuchi-san's expression changed, as if she had made up her mind about something. "If it's Tomozaki-kun.....it should be fine, right."

In a small voice, as if persuading herself.

Ah.....might this be *that*? How should I put it, the mood right now kind of felt like she was about to reveal an important secret. Were this an eroge or light novel, that would definitely be the case. It had that flag-like scent. However, I was conscious that this was probably something that came about from me being a supposed Andy-Something comrade. In the time that I was thinking to myself, *If that's the case, it might be best to not hear her what she has to say*, though, Kikuchi-san was already opening her mouth.

"To tell the truth, I've been.....writing a novel. It's influenced by Andy's works, though.If it's not too much trouble, would you mind reading it?"

"Eh!? Uh, a novel?!? You're writing one!?"

Receiving this attack from an unexpected angle and seeing those pupils which seemed moist with morning dew from a sacred tree, my mind was shaken.

"Yes..... As expected, that's a no?Of, of course it would be, after all, it's such a, sudden.....inconvenience....."

"Ah, no, no! Not at all! Fine, it's fine! If you're okay with me!"

When I inadvertently replied in that way out of reflex, Kikuchi-san's expression lit up like the sun.

"Re, really? Thank you! I, I'll bring it next time, all right.....!"

"O, okay! Um.....Th, thank you too."

"Yes!" A transparent, buoyant voice.".....I still, haven't shown it to anyone yet."

"Ah, is that, so.....? Are you really okay? With someone like me.....?"

In contrast to Kikuchi-san's glowing expression full of warmth, my back was growing colder with guilt.

"It's fine! Um.....rather, it's because it's Tomozaki-kun that..... N-no, I mean! Um, sorry, but!This matter.....it's a secret, all right?"

In the face of the enchanting form of that question, my head, as if brainwashed, was already nodding in return.

"Y, yeah. Got it, it's a secret."

Then, Kikuchi-san, with a simple ".....Well then.", got up and left her seat. Just before exiting the room, she spun around, and with a mischievous facial expression and tone of voice, said the following.

"Ebi Daite!"

Ahaha. It's hopeless. There's no turning back here. I don't care anymore!
After swallowing poison anything goes! ^[1]

"Mouzun Rekuku!"

Hearing those words, Kikuchi-san illuminated the library with a smile akin to a fountain of light. Then, in a way that was difficult to imagine based on those forest sprite-like dainty looks, she took off in a half-run, her small steps pitter-pattering away.

There was still some time to go before the next class. How should I put it, she might have been in an identical state of mind to the me during that experience several days ago, where, since the conversation had been going so well, I had brought it to an end before I had a chance to mess up. Or so my analysis went, being the only option I could use to vacantly escape from reality. Well, now I've gone and done it. *Now* what.

Translator Notes:

[1] The original is 毒を食らわばなんとやらじゃ, which seems to be based on the proverb 毒を食らわば皿まで (If you've swallowed the poison you might as well eat the plate too.)

Part 3

"And that's what happened....."

I told Hinami about everything that had taken place between me and Kikuchisan, omitting only the fact that she was writing a book.

"Huh, I can't believe it. It's almost stupid how much of a chance you have with her. I guess there's only one more week left until you fulfil your medium sized goal."

Hinami spoke disinterestedly. No, no, no.

"Wait *just* a minute. There's no way I can take advantage of this to go out with her. I mean, doing something like this is the same thing as deceiving her. I mean firstly, even if we *did* have the same favorite author, it still wouldn't be a reason to go out with me, right? Besides, it's not as if I, you know, *like* Kikuchisan or anything."

"Ara, deceiving a woman and leading her on, that's an awful way to put it."

"Wait. The way you've phrased that invites misunderstandings."

"There really *aren't* any misunderstandings. There's always been a boy in the library whom she has been observing, a boy of whom she is for some reason, conscious of. One day, when she finally decides to speak to him, she is surprised to find that the conversation is lively and enjoyable. Moreover, at the end of it, she is even able to exchange a secret greeting which appears in her favourite author's work.Well, assuming she's inexperienced with romance, it wouldn't be unheard of if she proceeds to fall in love."

"Wait, don't just pick and choose as you please! You *do* remember that embarrassing moment when she saw me blow my nose after I borrowed the packet of tissues, right?"

"A secret between just the two of you?"

"Stop making fun of me."

".....Well, what I said just now was meant as a joke, but here's the truth. It

would be an exaggeration to say she's fallen for you, *but*, there's a high chance she harbors some light affection. Though it is still at the stage where we don't know for sure."

Hinami's eyes were serious.

"That's why using self-deprecation to think '*There's no way she'll fall for me*' and escape from reality is the epitome of cowardice."

.....To be honest, the part of me thinking '*Something like that is impossible*' is stronger. I mean, it feels too surreal. However, if what Hinami said is true, then choosing to run away would certainly be awful. I mean there's even the matter of the novel, which Hinami isn't aware of. Wouldn't taking that into consideration mean that she might *actually* like me? And even if she really does like me, what should I do? What should I think?

"For now, assuming that it's true.....I suppose I'd be in the wrong here."

"Ha? What do you mean[*wrong*]?"

"What do I *mean*? I should have told her right there that I don't read those books!"

".....Exactly which part of it is *wrong*? You didn't *intend* to deceive her, right?"

"Well I didn't *intend* to, but it still ended up being a lie....."

"That doesn't matter anymore. There's no use in worrying about things which you can't fix. You're far too feminine. Instead, you should focus on deciding what to do from here on out."

".....That's true. I guess I really should tell her the truth then..."

"Go on a date with her."

"Ha?"

"Well, I think it would be good if you could set up a date with Kikuchi-san."

"No. As one might expect, that's a horrible thing to do."

"Exactly what about it is so horrible? Don't you get it?[Having the same favourite author]is simply a trigger. It's not like you'd fall in love just because of that. Human emotions aren't that simple. What's important is how well your

conversations go, how well you understand each other and what kind of memories you make together. Even if there was a slight misunderstanding when it all started, that's not wherein the importance lies. What if you try going on a date and, independent of having the same favourite author, the both of you enjoy yourselves. Wouldn't *that* be the essence of your relationship?"

"Th-that's.....probably true."

"Opportunities to understand someone in-depth don't appear very often. Since it looks like that's the case here, even *supposing* that it's something born from a lie, shouldn't you dive straight into such a blessed opportunity?"

"I understand the reasoning but...you know...it's not very sincere."

"Ugh, such a virgin-like statement to make. If you've understood the reasoning, you should know that it's the right thing to do."

"Shut up. I *am* a virgin."

Regardless of my understanding, I still found myself questioning the sincerity of the the method.

".....Well, whatever. I mean, I also know that feeling of wanting to fight using the sword forged at the blacksmith from the very beginning rather than using the strongest sword you can wield. The best plan put together based on reasoning alone isn't necessarily actually correct. I'm only a strategy guide. In the end, the one making the decision is *you*. So? What would you like to do?"

.....I.....

I was unable to come up with a reply so easily, so we decided to leave it at that and head home for the day. After parting with Hinami, as I was heading alone towards the shoe cupboards, I caught sight of someone walking unsteadily. On closer inspection I realized it was Izumi Yuzu, approaching from a direction that was clearly different from that of our classroom. Umm, what to do in this situation. Today's quota of two times had already been reached, so there really wasn't any particular reason to talk to her.But, in a game, what about only attempting that which has been indicated to you? As someone who takes pride in being Japan's number one gamer, I find such a thing displeasing. Leaving the entire plan up to *her* was *also* something I could not accept.

With that being the case. Shall I try it? Independent[Levelling Up].

All the while paying attention to my posture, facial expression and tone of voice, I spoke as naturally as possible.

"Izumi-san?"

With a start Izumi Yuzu turned her face towards me, her body shaking all the while.

".....Tomozaki.....?"

She said in a dejected, yet slightly relieved tone of voice. The atmosphere around her felt different than usual. It was as if every part of her had stopped caring. Come to think of it, she doesn't usually refer to me without a honorific, either. [1]

.....Or rather, this is bad. Umm, I should have plenty of topics memorized but there aren't any topics in there specifically geared towards starting a chat with someone after school. Ah— this is bad. My head, it's starting to go blank again. Bad. This is bad. Come on, think back. I've gone through all sorts of training up till now, which means there *should* be some kind of way out. Either amongst the strategies I've learned from Hinami, or in the efforts I've made in the past.

—[Talk about your conversation partner's facial expression or hairstyle. If it's basically anything "about the other person", it'll probably work out somehow.]

A flashback. That's *it*. During this week's first evaluation session, Hinami had said it. *When you have nothing to talk about, do that*. I didn't have any topics, but with *this*, things might work out somehow. Let me see, the other person's facial expression.....

".....Izumi-san, you seem down."

Really?! What *is* it with that way of speaking? Had it been an ikemen here, smooth lines like[What's wrong?]or[At the very least, I'll hear you out.]might very well have been spoken. However, *too bad*, it was me! No chance of *that* happening.

"Haaa!? I'm not particularly *down* or anything! Do you have a problem with that??"

"Ah, never mind, my bad." I got told off pretty badly.

".....Exactly *what* are you looking at?"

"Uh... well..."

"....."

"....."

Ahh—. I've gone and done it again. I give up. Let's stop taking things into my own hands. There's never been a time when that turned out well. That's right. I'm still not good enough to even reach the beginner stage.

".....Hey."

"Hm?"

".....Tomozaki, you're pretty good at AtaFami, right?"

"Eh?"

Why something like that at *this* timing?

".....lease"

With her head down, she was quietly whispering something.

".....Eh? What?"

".....mi, please"

"Sorry, what?"

"AHHHH! I *said*!"

I noticed tears under her harsh glare, blossoming to the surface of her eyes as her voice grew louder. Haaa!?

"I *said*, teach me AtaFami, please!"

I don't get it!

Translator Notes:

[1] She usually refers to him as Tomozaki-*kun* rather than just Tomozaki.

Part 4

—In summary, Izumi Yuzu's request was this. Up until now, she got along well with Nakamura and they would often go home together after school. Though recently, everyday after school, Nakamura would bring his own game machine to an unused classroom and either battle with his friends or practice AtaFami online using the staff room's Wi-Fi. Even if she went to the classroom after school and invited him to walk back with her, he'd always say "Be quiet, don't bother me" and pay her no further attention.

As a result, Izumi Yuzu had offered to help him practice ATAFAMI. However, after just one match, she was utterly defeated. In response to this overwhelming difference in ability, Nakamura had told her "This won't be practicing at all. You're a bother, so can you not follow me around?".

"Ah, I get it now."

Well of course. Going against this complete rookie of a girl wouldn't even count as practice for Nakamura. I mean, it's not like that guy's weak.

"Yeah, hmmm, this does sound kind of severe."

".....It's not like I'm asking for your opinion!" Izumi told me, red faced and with a voice full of emotion. "So!? Are you teaching me or are you not!?"

How should I say this, I think because I already saw her like this she no longer cares about her embarrassment showing or keeping up her image.

"Well, I guess I wouldn't mind....."

"Eh? You will!? Really!?"

Her sparkling eyes turned towards me without hesitation. Too close! It's the same thing with Hinami. Why do raijuu have such small personal spaces. To hiraijuu, this is a lethal distance.

"However, Izumi-san, do you own a copy of AtaFami?"

"Eh? I don't have one, but can't we just use yours? I do have a game machine, you know?"

".....Err, well, that's fine but "If we're going to do it like that, we have a big problem.".....where should I teach you?"

".....!"

Izumi Yuzu opened her eyes wide and her face turned red. Huh? What's up with such an innocent reaction? That was unexpected.

"Huh, I guess we don't have any place to do it."

Well, that's that. If she'd had a copy of AtaFami, then we could have played online. Without it though, we'd have to either do it at my house or at her house. As a boy and a girl, alone together.

".....But.....!" Her face was pleading me, to the point where I could see that she couldn't simply let this opportunity pass.

"However, going to either of our houses is somewhat....."

".....It's fine. I don't mind."

She made a determined face. Looking carefully, I realise she has some tears in her eyes. She's probably forcing herself. In other words, she hates being alone with me that much. That *hurts*.

".....Then it's fine, but....." I threw out the question I had in my mind. "Why are you going this far?"

Then Izumi Yuzu made a semi-angry semi-surprised expression and looked towards me.

"Ha!? You're asking about that!? Can't you tell from what I told you!?"

"What you told me.....?"

"Are you stupid!? You're so dense that it's *gross*!"

Youngsters these days are quick to say *gross*.

"Dense.....?" So it's something like that, huh? ".....Ah"

"Ha? What?"

I finally understood. Due to my enthusiasm at this revelation, I accidentally let my lips loose.

"So Izumi-san likes Nakamura!"

When I look at Izumi Yuzu, her face is so red that I can practically see steam coming out of her head.

"You're really *gross*. Unbelievable!!"

Her necktie and skirt fluttered as she rotated her body, attacking me with her school bag. A clean hit on my face.

".....Ouch..... So, uhh....."

"Ah, s-sorry.....But it's because Tomozaki's saying weird things!Are you OK?"

Izumi had a worried expression as she looked up at my face from down below. Her cutely shaped face being this close, without thinking I said something like "I'm fine, I'm fine!" in a strangely energetic manner.

"Really?but! You know what? I really don't understand Shuuji any more! You know Erika, right? She confessed to him and and got rejected. It's that Erika, you know! And then, he often hangs out with me..... then, does he like me? Things like that.....I...! I mean! Arrgh, isn't it normal to think like that!? But here he is now, suddenly saying things like *be quiet* or *don't follow me around*.... What's with that! What do you think!?"

"W-what do I think? Eh, how should I put it..... I can't make head or tail out of it?"

"Right!? And furthermore!"

.....Don't get swayed. Don't fall for her. If it allows her to complain, a girl will talk to anyone.

While massaging my throbbing nose, I began thinking. Even though Izumi Yuzu continued to vent her personal complaints one after the other, none of them entered my head. This became a very serious situation. This girl is, without exaggerating, a *riajuu*. Just the fact that she's close to Nakamura means that she has a level of *riajuu*-power she can boast about. Furthermore, her face's cute and she has a big chest. Going to either of our houses, alone, with this girl? What's with that. It's strange. Hey, Hinami-san, I'm sorry I'm always

speaking of you so badly, can you tell me what I should do here?

"Then.....err, whose house should we do it at?"

"Err,is Tomozaki's house fine? Mine's..... a bit...."

"Ah, mine? Izumi-san's house's doesn't work?"

"Is, isn't it obvious!?I can't explain it to my parents..... Sorry."

".....I understand."

Despite having first raised her voice, she followed up and became very apologetic. It looks like she isn't a bad person.

.....Or rather, eh?Parents?Ah. At this moment I realized something very critical.

"Ah, wait! Mine's impossible. It has to be yours."

"Ha!? Why? Didn't you just say it's fine!?"

"I did but..... Izumi-san, you're in the Badminton Club, right?"

"Eh? Me? Well, I am."

"You see, you know there's a first year called Tomozaki, right? Or rather, aren't you two quite close?"

That is the story I hear from time to time.

"Eh, un, you mean Zakki? I know her but.....eh?[Tomozaki]?"

"Yes. She's my sister."

".....Ehhhhhh!?"

You didn't have to be that surprised, is what I wanted to say before my voice was drowned out.

"Wait a minute! You're far too different! Especially your personality! What's with that! I don't get it!"

"I know what you mean. Even I find it hard to believe that we're related by blood."

"Zakki is a very cheerful and good child, right? And Tomozaki's so gloomy!"

Eh!? Unbelievable! It's strange, right!?"

"AHHH! I said I understood! Don't put it like that! I'll get depressed!"

".....Ah, s-sorry" And then Izumi Yuzu, regaining her calm, realized the problem."..... So it's impossible."

".....Yeah"

Indeed. It's much harder explaining to underclassmen than to parents. You wouldn't even know where to start.

"Th-then.....it has to be mine....."

".....YeahLet's sto-"

"OK! You know what. We'll do it. Come."

She looked at me with a calm face, as if she had made the resolve to drink poison. Yep, a girl in love is strong. If it's for the person she loves, she can endure any tough situation. However, I wanted to ignore the fact that me visiting her house is something that needs such resolve.

".....Is that so?"

"But, are you fine with this, Tomozaki?"

She confirmed with me. She thinks about other people more than I thought. I guess refusing is also an option.

.....What should I do here? Currently, the weapons I can use to a certain degree are only facial expression, posture, tone of voice and the memorized conversation topics. With only that, would it be possible to clear the super-difficult dungeon named [Izumi Yuzu's House]? Well, if you think about it rationally, it shouldn't be possible. What's waiting is only a miserable defeat. Then, it's no use. I had better run away. Escape. That's what I've always done. Run away from enemies against whom I cannot win, then challenge them again once more prepared. After all, that's the textbook method of playing games.

[In "Life", you gain experience not when you win battles, but when you lose them.]

Another flashback.

Ahh, right, *that* happened. Even though I don't blindly believe in those words, the reality is that I can now hold a normal[Conversation]with Izumi Yuzu. The 'me' in the past could have never dealt with a situation like this. It might be too early to conclude that the the[Cause]which brought upon this[Result]is the level up from gaining experience when I lost, but it *is* true that it would be only natural to think that way. Ah, *fine*. You don't need to tell me. I *am* a gamer. Hey, Hinami. Make sure you see this. I will try to confirm whether the [Cause]is really, as you put it, the [Experience points you gain when losing]or not. For that, I'll try suffering a great defeat. I don't even care if I end up crying afterwards!

".....No, it's fine. I'll go."I resolved myself and said that calmly."So where is your house? "

Izumi Yuzu, for some reason, looks at me somewhat dissatisfied.

".....Tomozaki, why are you so calm? Wait. Have you ever been to a girl's house before?"

"Eh, n....."I was about to say no, but then Hinami's face popped up in my mind."Ah, I more or less have."

"Ha!? What's with that! Even though you're Tomozaki! Even for me, it's....."

What do you mean by "Even though you're Tomozaki!"? Because I reek of being unpopular, I shouldn't have had the experience of visiting a girl's house. But I have so it's *gross*. Is that what you want to say? It's true that I'm unpopular, but I have no intention of putting up with being talked to in that manner. I told her this exactly.

"Your weird tone is *gross*, but..... whatever, come this way."

"Ah, wait, I have to go get AtaFami."

"Oh yeah."

I went home to grab AtaFami and a few other things before quickly departing again.

"Ok, Tomozaki. Let's go."

And like that, I was invited to a super-difficult dungeon. Take a good look,

Hinami. I'll experience a crushing defeat.



Translator Notes:

There aren't any. Wow.

Perhaps, "Please remember some explanation several months ago saying that a hiriajuu is the polar opposite of a riajuu"?

Part 5

Having no other example I could refer to, it was natural that I made this comparison, but the first impression I got was that compared to *Hinami's* room, it was pretty unorganized. That didn't mean to say it was *messy* or anything, but there were a number of character stuffed toys that had been placed on the bed, and the top of her desk was crowded with the covers of what appeared to be a row of fashion magazines, such that no matter where I looked, Izumi's room was bustling and showy. Moreover, all of those characters and magazines were ones even I somehow knew the names of, kind of giving me the feeling that it was a line-up of whatever was popular. Mounted on the wall was an over-embellished pin board, onto which photographs and photo booth stickers taken with the other riajuu in the class had casually been affixed. That one over there was probably of the so-called BFF type.

"Tomozaki, you're staring too much."

"Ah, sorry."

Izumi Yuzu came into the room carrying a tray on top of which she had placed a cute mug and a normal paper cup.

When she noticed me staring silently at the disparity, she said "Be quiet! Don't complain!". Hey, I didn't say anything.

"So..... where should we start?"

Izumi said, grabbing her controller and sitting upright. Her expression while watching the opening scene reflected the seriousness with which she regarded the situation. The game's screen was visibly reflected from within her large round eyes.

"Let's see..... then for starters" I sat at an appropriate distance, one where I wouldn't get suffocated by her riajuu aura, and grabbed my controller. "Shall we have a match?"

"Eh!? That's impossible! I mean, Tomozaki, aren't you even stronger than Shuuji!? Then it's impossible!"

"Well, that's true but..... see, if I don't understand Izumi's current ability, then....."

Right after saying that, I realized that I had been able to nonchalantly refer to her without the use of an honorific. Did this growth occur because of my numerous defeats? Or because we were playing AtaFami? Or because at this point I'd already been hit by her school bag so I really just didn't care anymore? I couldn't tell.

"I-Is that why.....? O-okay then."

Speaking timidly, Izumi seemed nervous. With a jolt, her shoulders rose. Her lips positioned firmly together, her eyebrows tense and serious. The expression on her face suited her strangely well.

On the character selection screen, I chose Foxy, the character Nakamura always uses. In response, Izumi chose the most charming of all the characters. A cute, attractive female fencer.

"Ah, wait a second."

"Eh? What? Was that a bad choice?"

Certainly, if Izumi's goal is simply[I want to get stronger because I like AtaFami], then it's best to just let her pick the character she likes the most.

However, Izumi's goal here is[To become Nakamura's practice partner]. If that's the case, then.....

"Use this one." I pointed to Found with my cursor. "Since this is the character I always use."

"Eh? Tomozaki's? Is that one better?"

"Not really. I'm suggesting this one because Nakamura is practicing in order to beat me, so he probably wants to come up with a counter-plan to what I use."

"I.....I see." With a grave expression on her face, Izumi nodded. "Tomozaki, you're quite smart."

"Eh? I-is that so?" Being complimented bewildered me. ".....Then, shall we begin?"

"Okay!"

The mood had gradually become more relaxed. I was playing my favourite game in a girl's room. In view of this riajuu-like situation, I strongly felt like I had made some incredible progress.

".....This can't be real....."

Izumi was in a state of shock.

"I see.....which means that the issue here is....."

".....That's besides the point! What *was* that just now! Tomozaki's movements were super gross!?"

We had fought with a stock of four lives each. Forget dying, I hadn't even taken a single bit of damage. As a result, the relaxing atmosphere from earlier had been completely blown away, as if to say, '*Progress? Ha!*'.

"Let's see, you have the typical movements of a beginner. You indiscriminately fire off skills that leave you very open to attacks and you aren't able to follow your opponent's movements. Those openings mean that on my side of things, I don't even need a strategy to hit you with my skills."

Internally adjusting the glasses on my face, I listed a number of things as a matter-of-fact.

"Eh, what? Tomozaki, you're acting kind of creepy."

Ignoring Izumi, who had now started to back away, I continued to mutter the rest of my analysis.

"Surprisingly, you were able to handle the basics such as inputting Strong attacks ^[1] or re-entering the arena fairly well, so.....the problem is how you move around..... Also, since you use too many special attacks, you need to incorporate more normal ones....."

"Um, hey, what's going on? It's getting really spooky!"

"Izumi!"

"Yes!?"

Izumi moved nimbly from her cross legged position to a seiza, straightening

her back. Her athletic ability seems to be pretty high.

"For the time being, I've decided what I'm going to have you do."

"Eh!? What!?"

Her eyes sparkling, Izumi leaned forwards towards me. Looking at her like this, I realized how dangerous of a situation this was. Her cute face, huge breasts and pleasant scent were all very close to me. However, since this was a matter concerning AtaFami, none of that entered my field of vision. Only my vision though, so I could still smell that pleasant scent.

I selected Training Mode, and began demonstrating some character controls.

"For the character Izumi used earlier, this is what happens when you perform a jump normally."

Found made a huge leap. Izumi's eyes followed the movement intently.

"However, if you only press the jump button for a very short period of time, *this* is the result."

".....Ah, that was low."

Pyon. [2] Found's jump only reached about a third of the height from earlier.

"*That* is called a small jump. You see, if you examine it really closely, AtaFami is a game where you compete by making adjustments to the distance between you and your opponent, and the weaknesses in their movements, constantly assessing just how low a risk it is with which you can attack. Which is why, when it comes to techniques like this that let you make fine adjustments to the distance, there's a need to get it right every single time."

"Wa, wait just a minute!"

Izumi stood up, and quickly moved towards her desk.

"Ow! My leg's sleeping!" Even as she was tripping over her own feet, she opened the drawer and took out a memo-pad and ball-point pen. She then returned to her original position.".....Any-anything else?"

Izumi, after apparently first writing down what I had said earlier, looked at me with an anxious yet earnest expression. How diligent. She's still in seiza though,

is that really alright?

"Let's have you try it for a while."

"Ah, o-okay....."

Receiving the controller with immense care, Izumi gave the jump button a short press.

"Huh?"

".....That's correct."

Pyo—n, Found made a big jump.

"Wa, wait! Let me try again!"

Pyo—n, *Pyo—n*, *Pyon*, *Pyo—n*, *Pyon*. A success rate of around thirty to forty percent.

"That's right, it's pretty difficult. However, if you aren't able to do this, it's safe to say that you being able to fight on even footing with Nakamura is out of the question."

"Out of the que.....?Th, then, I have to practice!"

"That's true, but it's actually slightly different, Izumi."

"Eh?"

My tongue had begun to cooperate, and I was no longer stumbling over my words. As expected, my principal battlefield is AtaFami.

"As not to waste time in the situation right now where we can play AtaFami, rather than practicing small jumps, it would be better to practice something more hands-on. That way the breadth of growth in your ability will be wider."

"I, I see.Eh, then, what about the little jumps?"

Opening with an '*About that*', I proceeded to tell her the following.

"Suppose you also want to practice the small jumps. However, at the same time you know it's more efficient to use the time spent playing AtaFami on more hands-on kinds of practice. So, how to proceed?There's only one answer, right?"

Then, changing my expression, in an imitation of that proud face I had by now become so used to seeing, I said *this*.

"Then you should just practice it when you *aren't* playing AtaFami."

".....Wh-what do you mean?"

"About that." From my pocket, I took out something that I had prepared in advance. "You use *this*."

".....A stopwatch?" Izumi gazed in wonder.

"That's right. Observe." Pressing the button, I began the timer. Then, with a click, I pressed the stop button. "See, look at that."

".....Huh? It's not stopping.But wasn't there a click?"

".....Okay Izumi, now you try."

"U, un." With careful movements, as if handling a precision instrument, Izumi accepted the stopwatch. Then, in sync with her entire body moving up and down, with an 'Ei', she pressed the button to begin the timer, and then, pressed the button once more.

".....H, huh?It's stopped."

"That's right.This stopwatch, it's[just a little]broken."

Receiving the stopwatch from her once again, I began the timer. And then, *click, click, click, click*. I pressed the button over and over again while showing Izumi the display.

"Huh? It's not stopping?"

"Yes. You see, for this stopwatch, if the amount of time you hold down the stop button is too short, it won't stop even if it makes the clicking noise."

"He, heeh. Is *that* how it is?B, but, how is it relevant?"

"It's simple." Like a certain someone, I sharply raised my index finger. "From now on every day; when walking to school, when moving between classes, or when watching television. In other words, aside from the times that you're meeting with other people, you are to constantly carry out this button pressing practice! If you do that, you'll be able to master the small jumps!"

"EHH!?"

Izumi was left astonished. Likely by both the contents, *and* the tone in which I had said it. The tone-well, I had slipped up and gone overboard with my imagery of *that* person. [3]

"You can practice with the stopwatch even while doing other things. Then, when you're at home and in an environment where you can actually *play* AtaFami, *then* you can do some hands on practice. *This* is the most effective way to practice."

"I see.....! Actually though, what was with that feminine tone just now!?"

As she spoke, Izumi continued to take notes in seriousness. Looking at this simpleton-ness, it was questionable if she *really* understood what I was saying. Though looking at her expression, for the time being at least, it was one of 'Wow, I really get it!'. It was pushing me to the brink of laughter. As for the thing about my tone of voice, just saying "Don't worry about it, I made a mistake.", was enough to receive a "Oh, okay." in response. Excellent, my obedient disciple is making progress.

"Anyway, as for how to go about doing the hands-on practice.....that's simple too." Izumi gulped audibly. "The answer is *memorization*."

"M-memorization?"

"Yes. Have a look at this."

I set the gamemode to Replay, and from the memory card that I inserted into the slot, selected the recording of a certain battle and began the replay.

"*This*.....is a save of how a battle between two of the game's top players went."

"Let's see, *nanashi*? And NO-",

"Well, that's not the important thing here. Both of these players primarily use Found, but in this battle nanashi is testing out Foxy, while the other side is using Found."

Taken aback, Izumi knitted her eyebrows together.

".....Wow. The same kind of gross movements as the ones Tomozaki was

using earlier."

"That's right, this Found is super strong and has no wasted movements. Polishing their control *not* by use of *intuition* in the same way that I.....uh, nanashi does, but by use of *theory*. That's why, if it's a reference you're looking for, this one is the most suitable."

".....So, what you're saying is, keep watching this over and over, and memorize it somehow?"

"That's close, but slightly off the mark." I handed the controller to Izumi."..... It's not '*somehow*'. I'm going to have you memorize how this entire match went from start to finish, and become able to perfectly replicate those exact movements with your controller."

".....Are you serious?"

Super Serious.

"This match had a four-life stock. Neither player really showed any openings, so the match time reached just over ten minutes. That means it'll be tough to memorize, but at the same time it also means that it's long enough to be able to cover all the important techniques to be found in this game. In order to explore all the possibilities with Foxy, I.....uh, nanashi, tests all *sorts* of tactics, so you can also find numerous variations of Found's countermeasures against those."

"I-I see."

I could essentially hear the circuits in her brain going haywire, though since she seemed to be barely keeping up, I continued.

"Once you've committed all of Found's movements to memory, next up will be Foxy's. By the point in time at which you've memorized both, Izumi *should* be able to fight with Nakamura on even footing."

"Re, really!?"

A smile of genuine delight spilled out. So this is the smile of a maiden in love, huh. I nodded in response.

".....But, still," Izumi's expression clouded over. "I can't tell how to operate the

controller just by looking at this recording. Like, I can't tell what skill is being used where....."

Quite so. There's also situations where you can't do an imitation even if you want to.As for what to do in those cases, it's simple.

"Yes, that's why I told you this earlier, right? —*Memorization*."

"Eh?"

Ignoring how unconvinced Izumi looked, I took out my pencil case and some loose-leaf paper from my bag. I then began to draw up a table and some simple diagrams.

".....I'm going to have you memorize this."

"What *is* this? A table of... *skills*?"

"That's right." As I filled up the columns of the table, I continued to add to my explanation. "This column labelled [Command] explains what you need to input in order to use a skill. Moving on, this stick-man shows the stance of the character when using that skill. The area outlined in blue is the approximate attack hitbox, while the parts outlined in red are the portions that have invincibility. [Start-up lag] is the time it takes after you've pressed the button for the attack hitbox to appear."

"Umm.....?" She didn't seem to be following immediately. ".....There's an F written here, what does *that* mean.....?"

"That stands for Frame. In AtaFami, each frame lasts 1/60th of a second. Well, just think of it as, the fewer the frames, the faster the attack materializes. Anyway, next there's [Damage Dealt], which shows the amount damage you inflict on the opponent. [Knockback] indicates how far you can knock your opponent back. There are techniques that only knock your opponent back a short distance despite dealing a lot of damage, and the opposite exists as well, so this bit requires special attention."

"O.....okay!"

She had energy in her words, but her expression reflected that she wasn't following at all.

"Well, it's fine if you don't understand right now. As your memorization of the replay and this table of techniques progress side by side, you should gradually come to understand the special characteristics of each skill, and why a skill was used at a particular timing. If anything, I would like you to memorize them *while thinking about those things*.Well, even if you simply memorize them and commit them to muscle memory, your ability should rise befittingly, so doing that much is fine too."

"O, okay....."Izumi finished taking her notes.".....Rather, what's *with* you, Tomozaki? Did you memorize this *whole* table? You wrote all of that down without looking at anything....."

"Eh? Ahh, of course."In response to my words, Izumi gave me an astonished look, but I continued to elaborate even further."Not just for Foxy and Found, but I've also perfectly memorized the skills of all thirty eight characters."

".....Se, seriously?"

"Yes. Should I write them down and show you?"

Izumi's facial expression went beyond being one of astonishment to one of being taken aback, and soon surpassed even that, to being one of admiration.

"Hey, haven't you been kind of amazing since a while ago?"Izumi said, her expression revealing the questions circulating in her mind.

"Hm?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it. It's amazing but.....by doing all that, you don't really gain anything, do you? Why are you going so far?"

Just what is this person bringing up so suddenly? Is that an otaku-diss?

"Ha? What do you mean, '*why*'? It's not like I'm playing AtaFami to get more popular with everyone, and I'm not playing it to get praised by people either, you know?"

When I said this like it was natural, with an 'Eh!'. Izumi's eyes filled with an expression of wonder.

"Really!? Even though it's a game!?"

"Well, of course. Just what do you think people play games for?"

Ahh, but come to think of it, it *does* seem like kids these days play games for the purpose of making friends.

"I mean, if it's *that* level of strength, won't people distance themselves? They may think you're *far* too strong, even I was taken aback earlier. Though if you're only *kind* of strong, it would be more like '*Wow, amazing*' or something. If you overdo it, then everyone will be going '*He's way too good at this, ew*'. That kind of thing, you really don't have a problem with it?"

A strangely earnest face. Then, at that moment. A recent conversation that resembled this one crossed my mind.

The conversation I'd had with Mimimi when we were on the way back together. This right now was probably related to the same thing.

"It's not like I'm entirely indifferent to it. It's just that what I would have a bigger problem with, more so than being distanced from everyone else, is having decided for myself that I want to become stronger, but being unable to attain that goal."

"Heeh.....is that how it is?"

In order to confirm that these conversations had similar origins, I tried asking her a question.

"Are you trying to ask if I don't care about what people think?"

"Th, that's right!"

Just as I had thought. Mimimi had said that, for the sake of preserving a situation's mood or enjoyableness, she would choose to bend into whatever shape she had to. Also, if the current conversation was to be any indication, Izumi and Mimimi were probably similar types in no small degree. Rather than that having become a habit, it might be more accurate to say that it had become their personality. In a game, you might say they possessed the same attribute.

Rather than that similarity being a coincidence, just as Hinami said, it's probably just that those kinds of people are more in number. No sense of values that they could stick to, harboring some sort of doubt towards their somewhat insecure self, that kind of situation.

"It's not like I don't care but.....you could say that there are things that I find more important....."

"But you know, isn't it tough being cut off from everyone? Like, surely the break times won't be fun and every day wouldn't be enjoyable. Actually..... I've never seen you enjoying yourself at school, Tomozaki."

"Leave me alone!"

"Ahahaha!"

For a moment the mood became more relaxed. However, it's true. That's really quite a serious issue. Probably.

"But I mean, it's not like laughing together with your friends is all there is to life or anything....."

Keeping in line with everyone, being evaluated by everyone, not being cut off and not being distanced away from. Doing all of this, so as to not be excluded. So as to belong in a group, living while conforming to the sense of values — basically, the[Mood], I think Hinami had called it — that someone had created. For Izumi, her current happiness probably existed in those things, and those things alone.

"He, heeh. That's amazing. that's a perspective I could never have. I wonder why that is? Even when I wanted to change, I could never push myself to. That's how it's always been..... wait, sorry! What am I going on about!? AHH, ignore that, pretend I didn't say anything! Anyway, there's all sorts of people, huh! There's a lot to life!"

Izumi, while flapping her hands, made light of the mood. She was smiling, but her gaze was facing elsewhere, her eyes teary. Her face mainly showed embarrassment but — how should I put it — Izumi's expression revealed that for *her*, this problem was not only very real but also very significant.

Then, a single question came to mind. Mimimi and Izumi. Even though both of their worries were the same content-wise, why was it only Izumi who ended up being this serious?

For Mimimi it was, *'I'll protect Tama'*, *'It's better to have fun, so let's go with this!'* - that kind of light-heartedness. However for now, Izumi was this

troubled... this serious.

I wonder what the difference between them is...

It could also be that Mimimi is just good at hiding it.

And then, I remembered something. As vague as it was, the sense of discomfort after my conversation with Mimimi still lingered in my mind.

[It feels like Mimimi is the one being supported]. At the time it had seemed like a baseless conjecture.

But now, it felt like I had slightly understood why such an intuition had drifted across my mind.

—As I thought, it really is true that Mimimi is the one being supported. Even more so than Tama-chan.

I recalled the incident in the Home Economics Room.

[.....Thanks for earlier too, Minmi.][.....For what—? I didn't do anything, you know~]

The nature of that relationship.

[Precisely because Hanabi, at any time, says exactly what she thinks, the defenses around her heart are weak. Therefore, if there isn't anyone around to become her shield, or to divert the attacks that come flying towards her, then her spirit quickly becomes exhausted.]

That analysis had been Hinami's. Making inference after inference, I finally arrive at a conclusion.



It was certainly true that Tama-chan was being helped out by Mimimi.

However, beyond that...

Most likely, Mimimi was finding meaning in protecting Tama-chan, an existence she was able to help by her own power. In the same way that having a goal allowed me to continue to play AtaFami, and in the same way that having a goal enabled Hinami to aim for first place in everything, Mimimi had such a goal established internally. In that goal, in those results, she could find a definite meaning. *That* is why she wouldn't waver.

It was likely that Izumi didn't have such a goal. She couldn't find meaning to support her actions. Without a goal, she was just being swept along with the current. Izumi likely had many friends. However, an existence like who Tama-chan was to Mimimi, for whom meaning could be found in the action of giving in for their sake. For Izumi, no such person existed.

It might all be nothing but the analysis of a novice. It might have just a week of sample data. However, based on my own experiences, this was the feeling I got.

Still, I had another thought. This too based on my experiences. It had nothing to do with supporting another person, nor was it about another person supporting you. It was only about yourself. I mean, isn't it possible to find the strength within you to support yourself?

"It's not like it's *impossible* to change though, right?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, you can start right now. As long as you *want* to change."

"Eh? Change my personality? No way, no way! What are you even saying! I'm already seventeen years old, you know? It's too late! There's no point discussing it, this conversation already is over!"

With a perfect artificial smile which couldn't even be distinguished from a normal one, Izumi tried to downplay the situation. From that expression, it was clear that, even without me noticing it, this was the kind of method she would use to weather the battlefield known as the classroom.

—At this point, there were many things I was pondering about; my previous conversation with Mimimi, what I had heard from Hinami about Tama-chan's

strengths and weaknesses and right now, Izumi's glossed-over words that actually exposed her true thoughts. And, at the same time, I remembered a certain something Hinami had said.

[The thing called a conversation is, by nature, exchanging with the other party, "The thoughts inside one's head", you see.]

[It would appear that "Speaking your thoughts as they are" seems to be a strong point of yours.]

Supposing that truly is the case, supposing that is what a conversation truly is, then I think I should try telling Izumi right now, [The thoughts inside my head]. In a super difficult dungeon, if you're going to fight no matter what, then bring out everything you have and *annihilate* the enemy. Something like that.

".....Even I, all the way from birth up until now used to have a set personality. Or rather, more accurately, a certain way of thinking."

"Eh?"

Perhaps being surprised by my suddenly serious tone of voice, her artificial smile crumbled a little. I was consciously trying to speak in the most serious[tone]I could muster. Surprised by the fact that this tone was actually having an effect, however slight, and moreover, on a *ria juu*, I continued to speak.

"My way of thinking, is that [Life is a kusoge]. [Life] is unreasonable. Kyou-charas benefit, jaku-charas get exploited. There aren't even any rules that make it worth taking on. It's just a game of chance. There isn't any merit to someone to pouring their own passion and time into it, and neither is there any need to do so. This is what I think."

"U, un....." Izumi's smile slowly began to morph into an expression of astonishment.

"That's why even if someone were to suffer losses in the game called Life; even if they get cut off from the others in the classroom, even if they can't get a girlfriend, even if they have no friends, even if their social position in class is low, none of it matters a single bit. After all, it's a kusoge. On the other hand, since AtaFami is a kamige, when compared to winning in life, winning in

AtaFami has more merit to it by far, is an incredible thing, and more than anything else, is to me, *true* happiness, *those* are the kinds of thoughts I have had. Ever since birth, constantly, up until now."

Izumi didn't remove her gaze from me, only staying silent.

"However, by chance I recently met a certain gamer. A gamer who has a bad personality, but is about as good at gaming as I am. They told me *this*. [Life is a kamige]. Honestly, I was like, '*What is this person even saying?*'. However, after all kinds of persuasion, I decided to try it. Though I don't completely believe them just yet, the fact those words were spoken by a talented gamer, *convinced* me to try assessing their accuracy myself. —In other words, to try playing the game called[Life]a *little* seriously."

Izumi blinked in surprise.

"Anyway, they taught me things like strategies and where to put in effort, and I worked as hard as I could on all sorts of things. And at some point during that process, I kind of thought *this*.No, it's frustrating, but it could pretty much be called a *confirmation*."

Then, with my feelings more so directed not towards Izumi, but the world's most hardworking, most self-confident, and most *ill-natured* gamer, I said the following.

"*"I don't know yet if Life is a kamige or not, but at the very least, it's a decent game!"*"[4]

Izumi's mouth hung open in amazement. Then, while smiling, she said the following.

"— Not a[kamige]?"

I too, rather than forcing an expression, smiled naturally, and said the following.

"Ahh, well, that's because I'm yet to actually confirm that. I don't say things I don't believe in."

".....That's amazing."

Izumi was still smiling.

".....But for the sixteen years-plus me who had until now thought[Life is a kusoge], to even start thinking that[Life is a decent game]after just a little push. Don't you think that's an *incredible* change?"

"Ahaha. That's..... true. Maybe? Ahaha, it's weird."

Don't 'Ahaha' me. I haven't finished what I want to say.

"That's why it doesn't matter. A personality that hasn't changed for many years or anything along those lines, none of that matters."

Perhaps finally realizing the point I was trying to make, Izumi looked at my eyes in surprise.

"That's why Izumi, if you want to change, even *you* should be able to change."

Then I forced myself to meet Izumi's gaze.

".....For sure. Even if you start now."

—Thus, the result of challenging the super difficult dungeon ended up being neither victory nor defeat. Instead, I received the unexpected conclusion[Guidance End].

Translator Notes:

[1] For more info on tilt attacks (officially known as strong attacks), see <https://www.ssbwiki.com/Attack>

[2] A *pyon* is something you should immediately recognize as the sound something makes when jumping.

[3] In his speech in the previous paragraph, his speech pattern ends up being very much like Hinami's (するのよ！なるわ！ etc.). It's also a distinctly feminine way of speaking Japanese. Those kind of small things can't really be carried over to the English TL very easily, so just letting you know in this note.

[4] The original is actually 良ゲー (yoge), which basically means it's a good game. The term doesn't show up very often so it has been localized here.

Part 6

"Y, you really think so.....?"

Her eyes sparkling, Izumi's gaze was trained on me. However, now that I had finished saying everything on my mind, I had reverted back into the usual me with ineffective ad-lib conversation skills.

"Un, well, probably."

Izumi burst into laughter.

"Ahaha, what's with that? You're so unreliable!"

".....Sorry about that."

Since I had managed to keep a natural conversation going from arriving at her house up until now, I had briefly wondered whether my conversation technique had improved without me realizing it. I now understood that it really wasn't anything to get my hopes up over. The fact of the matter is that there were only two reasons I had been able to express myself properly; because we were talking about *AtaFami*, and because I had only been voicing what I had in mind, something I had always been able to do.

".....But.....okay, I'll try it."

"Eh?"

"*AtaFami* practice and.....um, what people around me think? I'm also going to try and change, in a way that those types of things won't bother me anymore.As you've said, I won't know until I try."

".....I see."

"Un.....ah, that's right." Izumi took out her phone. "Can you give me your contact details? If there's anything I don't understand, I'd like to ask."

"Eh!? No um, me giving advice on how to cope with what other people think is a bit....."

"Not *that*, I mean advice about *AtaFami*."

"Ah, of *course* that's what you meant....."

We exchanged contacts as I got a look from Izumi going '*What is this person saying*'.

"Okay—!"

"Ah, yeah, anyway.....I should probably get going now."

After all, I had already told her everything I needed to tell her regarding AtaFami.

"Un, ah, the game!"

"Ah, it's fine, that's just my sub-ROM. The memory card is also a backup."^[1]

"Saburomu? Bakkua?"

".....Ah, it's nothing. It just means that I've got another copy."

"Ohh, really? But.....then, if you'd lent me this one, couldn't you have taught me using the online function..... ? "

"Ah! You're right!Sorry."

"Ahaha. Well, thanks to that we got to discuss a lot of things, so I guess it's okay!"

"Haha."It was a relief to hear her say that."See you."

"Ah, un, take care! Ah, one more thing.....uhh, umm—"

"Hm?"

".....Never mind! See you!"

What was *that* all about? Pondering over this sudden outburst, I left Izumi's house.

Then, barely five minutes later, I received a short message from Izumi.

[Thanks]

No emojis, no nothing. Just six simple characters. Perhaps this is what she had tried to convey earlier, but ultimately had not been able to. '*I wasn't able to say it out loud, so I'll tell him by mail*', perhaps. How should I put it-even though she's a riajuu, it seems like there's also a part of her that's easy to get along

with.

With the content being what it was, once I had finished reading it, I immediately decided to respond with a message.

—A message to Hinami asking *‘How should I reply at times like this?’*, though.

Translator Notes:

[1] That’s just a Japanese word for a second ROM cartridge/Game cartridge that is used a lot less than the main one. For example, in Pokémon one might possess a second cartridge (and possibly a second gaming machine) to trade Pokémon/rare items to the main ROM.

Part 7

"The kind of miracle where the sword you've equipped coincidentally has the attribute that is the boss's weak point, and the shield you've equipped is coincidentally resistant to the attribute that the boss uses, huh."

Saturday. After reporting the incident with Izumi to Hinami via a brief mail, I had received the reply "Tell me the details in person". This had resulted in the abrupt scheduling of today's meeting.

"There really is some incredible miracle at work here."

As I spoke, I stayed dumbfounded by the enormous parfait on the table.

"By the way, I've been thinking. Haven't there been a lot of awfully convenient things cropping up lately? Like, the matter with Izumi. As *well* as the matter with Kikuchi-san. Hinami, are you sure you haven't secretly been laying any groundwork?"

Incidentally, for whatever reason, today's meeting place was a famous cafe within the Tokyo Metropolitan area, a fair distance away from Saitama. Here, at the present time, Hinami was calmly eating a weapon of extreme sweetness composed of strawberry, banana and melon, topped with a much too generous amount of whipped cream and condensed milk.

"Just *what* are you saying. I haven't done anything. The one who's been laying the groundwork is *you*."

"Ha? Me?"

"That's right. After all, if you hadn't always visited the library when the time came to move classes or hadn't borrowed tissues from Fuuka-chan, then she wouldn't have approached you in the library. And if you hadn't beaten up Nakamura Shuuji in AtaFami or hadn't continued to talk to Yuzu every day for a week, then *even* if you had still come across Yuzu walking unsteadily yesterday, it wouldn't have developed into you visiting her house. Everything that's been happening has been a result of things that *you* have done."

So said Hinami while, in the name of halvesies, she tucked into what

represented eighty percent of a parfait that I had ordered as a result of her pointing at it and saying '*I recommend that you order this one*'. It sure is impressive how she's managing to eat all of that. I had already reached my limit after eating my twenty percent. Incidentally, this one was called a Peach and Whipped Cheese Milk Parfait or something like that.

"Well, I suppose that's true....."

"Pretty stoical, aren't you? Can't you appreciate your own efforts a little more? Well, if by not doing so you can preserve your motivation, I suppose it's fine."

Just *how* is this person able to speak so smoothly and clearly while having food in her mouth?

"I *am* appreciating them..... to a certain extent."

When I said that, Hinami stopped moving the hand that she was using to eat.

".....Really?" She seemed rather happy. I couldn't tell if it was because of the parfait being delicious. "That's fine then. How does it feel to have tried it out? Don't you think that changing your life for the better through your own efforts is beautiful?"

Grinning, Hinami peered into my eyes. Slightly flustered, I averted my gaze.

".....Kind of, yes."

"Heeh, so you can get embarrassed because of things like this, huh."

"Shut it."

"Well, whatever. With this, you should have drawn even closer to your medium-sized goal."

".....Were you even listening to me? Izumi's trying so hard because she likes *Nakamura*, you know?"

"Nevertheless, you wouldn't expect Yuzu to have a conversation with Nakamura Shuuji containing the same level of depth as the one she had with you yesterday. Moreover, you were in possession of something that Yuzu was lacking. Well, be that as it may, her coming to like you due to just that isn't very likely. At the very least, if it's the *current* you."

"The *current* me?"

"You may have grown somewhat, but there are still many aspects of you which have a long way to go. Though considering the long term, if you keep up your efforts and continue to grow, then there's enough of a possibility that it might just barely happen by the end of this year."

".....Seriously?"

It's *that* Izumi Yuzu we're talking about here, you know? The riajuu one. Well, I guess she did kind of describe it as a rather *fragile* possibility.

"Yes." She finished off the parfait. "Well, it's what *could* happen."

"I'm impressed you actually managed to finish that....."

"Anyway, have you decided? What you're going to do about Kikuchi-san, I mean."

"Ahh, well, I'm still slightly hesitant, but I've more or less decided."

".....Is that so. Well, I won't ask for specifics regarding that. Report to me after you've put it into practice." As she said this, she took out her wallet. "However, if you're going to try asking her out on a date, I recommend that you use these."

".....Movie tickets?"

"Yes. For this Sunday's preview screening of Mary Jone."

"Preview screening?Are you recommending that I invite her to see a movie?"

"Well, yes. But more importantly, it will be your first invitation to go out and have fun together, and you should bear in mind that if you're too forceful it will leave a bad impression. With that being the case, you can invite her under the pretense of having had these tickets fall into your hands, but having no one to go with. Also, since the date is fixed, should she not want to go, it will be easy for her to decline on the basis of her having things to do. If she *does* end up going, note that for a date in a movie theater, it doesn't matter as much if the conversation is sparse. Besides, after you've both seen the movie, won't you then have something in common to talk about?"

"I, I see....."

"On top of that, if she truly *is* into you, then even if she really *can't* make it that day, there's a high chance that she ends up inviting you to go out on a different day instead. Anyway, the point is that there's very little risk involved."

"I see.....well, it's not like I had already had everything planned, so I suppose I might as well accept these. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Then, with her purse still in hand, she stood up. "Excuse me, I have to get going. I too have a number of things to take care of. As for the bill, most of what we ordered was eaten by me, and there's also your travelling expenses as a result of me calling you all the way over here to consider. So I'll be paying."

I was about to refuse her offer with a, '*It's fine, I'll pay*', but I realized she wasn't likely to change her mind about it. So with a meek '*Oh, really? Thanks*', I let her do as she wished.

Part 8

That very night. As always, I was using the IC recorder Hinami had lent me to record and listen to my own voice over and over again, repeatedly practising and revising my tone.

However this time, when I was trying to playback the sound, I made a mistake and accidentally pressed the wrong buttons.

"Wait, what? What's this? Did I switch it to a different folder?"

Instead of displaying the usual number [63], indicating the amount of files available, it now displayed the number [781].

Uhhh, what do I do now? How do I change it back?

I tried experimenting by pressing random buttons, but instead of switching back, it started a playback of the recordings in the folder. *Crap! It's probably not a good idea to listen to this!* I hurriedly tried to press the Stop button but, surprised by the first few words that came out, I involuntarily stopped that hand.

[It's *that* kind of thing that got you rejected by Shimano-senpai! *Really, younger guys have zero reliab*.....hmm, that's not quite right.]

Wait. Is *this* really what I'm listening to?

[Really, youngernn! Younger.....Aa—aa—aa—.Really, youngerugh!]

This was from when she helped Mimimi, Tama-chan and I during that incident in the Home Economics Room.

[It's because of that kind of thing that that you got rejected by Shimano-senpai! *Really, younger guys have zero reliability*.....okay!That was good. *Really, younger guys have zero reliability, Really, younger guys have zero reliability*.....I've got it now.]

That was where the recording cut off.

Since it was a matter of personal privacy, as one would expect, I didn't intend

to go so far as to listen to a different recording. However, I had understood well enough from just that. It had been conveyed more than well enough. Exactly what the most amazing thing about this person was. I mean, up until now I'd had a vague idea. But with that recording, I had been granted the opportunity to experience it personally.

The most amazing thing about this person, is how she's trying her absolute hardest to *be* amazing.

Translator Notes:

If you don't remember that bit about Shimano-senpai, it's somewhere in the monstrosity that is Chapter 2 Part 1.

Part 9

The following week. For the two day period from Monday to Tuesday, I used each break time I shared with Izumi to have a quick chat with her about AtaFami. Aside from receiving a few surprised looks from those around us, there were no particular incidents. Izumi was memorizing the skills much faster than I had anticipated, and when I told her "If you keep this up, you'll probably be good enough to fight Nakamura by the end of this week.", she was overjoyed. I've taken on a good disciple. Since we sit next to each other, it's also easy for us to talk.

There was also very little conversation during my strategy meetings with Hinami. The conversations we *did* have were pretty much only her telling me not to let up with what I had been doing so far with regards to my posture, facial expression, tone of voice practice and memorization of conversation topics. Either that or her encouraging me to talk to Izumi and Kikuchi-san as much as possible.

Then Wednesday arrived. This day would end up becoming the most turbulent day of them all since the day I met with Hinami.

**Chapter 6: After clearing the dungeon,
upon returning to the village, a strong boss
will likely await**

Part 1

Today there would be a lesson held in a different classroom. In other words, if I were to visit the library during the break just before that lesson, I would end up alone with Kikuchi-san.

Just like in the previous two days, ever since the school day had begun I'd had the occasional chat with Izumi, reviewing various AtaFami matters with her. It was now the aforementioned break. I headed towards the library as per my usual routine, but in a state of mind that differed from usual.

When I opened the library door, Kikuchi-san was already there. Noticing my arrival, she shot me a smile which resembled an elegant springtime breeze. A beauty. Her gaze then quickly returned to the book she was reading. My task here would have been a lot easier if she had begun speaking to me about — who was it again? Andy? But instead I realized the task of starting the conversation fell upon me. While keeping the sound of my footsteps at a moderate level so as to not startle her, I walked towards Kikuchi-san. As soon as I was right next to her, with extremely beautiful movements resembling those of a sacred dragon, Kikuchi-san turned around to face me.

"Hn.....? Is something the matter.....?"

As always, a voice that would make one question if a drop of an angel's tears had fallen in their ear and was now permeating their eardrums.

As I said "Ah, there's something I want to talk about.....", I pulled up a seat next to Kikuchi-san. After first adjusting its position so it was at a suitable distance, I then sat down. After all, were a trueborn hiriajuu like myself to bask in the holy aura of a beauty at point blank range, their body would dissolve into light and evaporate.

"Is something wrong.....?"

"Ah, well....." Even though her pupils *should* have been black, for some reason, they now seemed like they were a deep green, as if infused with elf magic. Being looked at by them, my resolve was on the brink of wavering.

"Remember our conversation about Andy the other day? About that....."

"Ah, yes.....!"

The light living in Kikuchi-san's eyes began to shine even brighter. However, I steeled my resolve.

"Actually....."Going straight to the point, I told her the answer I had decided on."The thing about me liking that author, it was a lie. In fact.....I haven't even read a single one of their books!"

With an innocent tilt of the neck, the white ermine – I mean, Kikuchi-san, blinked in surprise.

"Pardon.....?"

Despite being shaken all the while, not just by the air about her resembling that of a fairy or an angel, but also by her ability to even emit the innocent aura of a very young child, I continued to speak.

"It's the truth."

"Eh.....? But I saw you actually reading....."

A justified question. Seeing me open the book every time I visited the library would make anyone think that to be the case.

However. The reality was slightly different.

I told her about how I really, *really* like AtaFami. How that meant I would set aside time for it at times when I'm free. How me coming to the library was due to myself disliking the atmosphere present when moving to the next class too early.And finally, how I had only been pretending to read books, and had actually been analysing AtaFami tactics.

"That's why, I..... forget *liking* that Andy person's works or anything, I haven't even read a single one of them. It's just, I didn't really know how to explain it, so in the end I tried to cover up that fact."

Kikuchi-san's expression was one of neither reproachfulness nor forgiveness, but simply a genuine look of disappointment.

"Is that.....so? But, what about the good luck charm.....?"

"Good luck charm.....? Ahh! Ebi Daite, you mean?"

"Un.....it appears quite often in the book you were reading at that time.....
'Goodbye, let us meet again', that charm....."

"Ah, so it appears quite often? Though now that you've mentioned it, that's right, it was also written on the pages I had open back then. I thought that was the best way to get through the situation, and kind of gave you a reply on the spur of the moment."

"Oh, is that what happened....."

"Yeah, that's why, um, I think there might also be something wrong with the promise to read the novel you've written. Since it was a misunderstanding..... rather, it was a promise that resulted from my lie..... Sorry."

"Is that so.....I understand." She then let out a small sigh. "Please don't worry about it."

As if washing away my feelings of guilt, Kikuchi-san gave me a forgiving smile. Assuming I wasn't just getting carried away here, it also seemed somewhat lonely.

Now came the question of what to do from here. It was only at the very last minute that I had made this decision. That is, this decision on whether or not to invite her to the movie after apologizing. I lightly touched the preview screening tickets that were in my pocket.

".....But, you know." I began to speak, all the while aware of the loud beating of my heart. "I think I'll still come to the library, so.....next time, I want to have a normal talk with you, unrelated to your favourite author or anything. The books by that author Michelle Andy, I've been thinking about giving them a try as well.If it's fine with you, how does that sound?"

In response to my proposal Kikuchi-san blinked a few times, her long eyelashes swinging up and down. Then, with an air befitting of a young girl as opposed to the usual air from a fantasy setting, she laughed happily.

".....Ahahaha! Tomozaki-kun. It's not Michelle, but *Michael*, you know?It would seem that you really *don't* read his works."

"Ah..... So it was *Michael*. Right,ahaha."

"Fufu."

"Uh, but, that's the gist of things. Umm..... is it fine if I come again?"

In response, Kikuchi-san, with a smile of human kindness that was as warm as sunlight filtering through the trees, said the following.

".....Of course, please do!"

Becoming instinctively embarrassed by the expression on her face, with a mere "That's a relief. See you.", I left the library.



Then, I quickly walked off towards the Home Economics Room.

I thought inviting her to see the movie in that situation would be sly. Since I had just told her about the lie, Kikuchi-san would probably still be feeling the aftereffect of the excitement of sharing the same favorite author. If so, then I would need to wait for everything to reset before inviting her since otherwise I felt it wouldn't be sincere. Which is why I considered it the right decision to leave things at that.

In that manner, I brought the matter with Kikuchi-san to a close in my own way. For the rest of the school day, passed the time feeling refreshed. During breaks, I would casually talk to Izumi about AtaFami, after which she would join the riajuu group near the windows at the back, leaving me alone in my own seat. It had settled into such a routine that when such a thing happened, it was progress even I could recognize. The self-confidence would also follow as a matter of course.

——Of course, it's only at times like these that incidents take place.

Part 2

"Tomozaki."

"Eh?"

After school. My name was called out by a voice I wasn't used to being called out by.

Turning, I found one of Nakamura's buddies — Takei, glaring at me with his arms crossed. Next to him was an expressionless Mizusawa, looking in my direction with a surveying gaze. The two who had followed Nakamura's lead during that incident in the Home Economics Room.

"Come here a sec."

"Sorry?"

What's this? A summons? If it's these guys doing it, then there's almost no mistaking that Nakamura is involved. But, why? The build-up from the AtaFami incident should have been successfully deflated by Hinami, so had I done something to annoy him? Or else, might this not be a particularly negative kind of summons? Nah, given this tone of voice, there's no way that'd be the case.

"Hurry up, this way."

There's probably no point in attempting an incoherent verbal resistance, so it looks like I have no choice except to go with them. I scanned the classroom, wondering if Hinami was observing the situation, but she was nowhere to be found.Most likely, she had gone on ahead to the second Sewing Room. Which meant that for this surprise boss fight, I would have no choice but to hold out by my own strength.

I was led away, or rather, *taken* away, and we eventually reached our destination just diagonally opposite the staff room. A place that apparently used to be the principal's office, but was now a vacant room, no longer in use. Remnants from the time when it was the principal's office, there was a sofa and a desk, rather old-looking, but not necessarily *unused*, as well as various other furnishings, including a small CRT television.

And in there was not just Nakamura, but also several other males from the riajuu group.

".....Uhhh?"

With Takei and Mizusawa included, a total of six people. Just what is going on. Am I going to be lynched or something?

"Ohh, Tomozaki."

Nakamura. I felt a sense of intimidation simply from getting my name called. When I instinctively averted my eyes, a familiar object entered my vision. Eh. Is that a game machine?

"Ah, wait. Is this to do with AtaFami?"

The unexpected development is confusing me. Eh? Could this be the revenge match?

"That's right. Hurry up and sit down."

Doing as I was urged, I sat down in front of the controller that had been prepared, upon which the gaming machine was started up. On the television screen, a familiar opening clip began to play.

"Uh, wait, wh, what's this for?"

Ignoring my confused self, Nakamura's followers distanced themselves from myself and Nakamura, lining up along the back of the room.

"It's just as you think."

In a low, resounding voice, Nakamura announced that to me. In other words.

"So a revenge match?"

Nakamura lightly clicked his tongue, and spat out the words 'The way you said that... don't get carried away'.

"Uh, but."

I looked behind me. There was a gallery of spectators. In other words, whatever happened here, there would be witnesses to all of it. When we had previously fought, to put it bluntly, I had won an *overwhelmingly* overwhelming victory. However, those who knew just how big a difference there had been at

that time were probably only myself, Nakamura, and Hinami. Which meant it wouldn't be unnatural in the least for people to think that the difference had been marginal.

But, having a showdown in this place was different. Everything, up until the very details, would be perfectly visible to everyone.

It's true that Nakamura may have practiced a lot these past few weeks. Considering that he started with that level of ability, if he had on top of that seriously practiced, then defeating the likes of his followers currently present with no deaths would be a breeze. However, this and that are completely different. After all, I'm just too strong. For that short a span of time, no matter how much practice he put in, it would still be a drop in the bucket. ^[1] No, on the contrary, I'm even confident that no matter the breadth of *his* improvement since that time, the breadth of my own will be larger. Supposing for argument's sake that I were to play while avoiding risks to the maximum, with the resolution for a long, drawn-out battle, then it would even be possible to take no damage. Even supposing that I were to *not* play in that way, no deaths would be a breeze for me.

That is why this is something we have to avoid doing. It wouldn't be on the level of simply losing face. If I were able to hold back it would be fine, but holding back in AtaFami is something I absolutely *cannot* do. Which is why, this has to stop.

"I really think it would be better if we didn't."

"Seriously.....don't get so full of yourself."

Since I had made that remark while looking behind us at the gallery of spectators, now that I think of it, that had probably conveyed a meaning like "It'll be embarrassing, you know?" to him. So it had angered him even more. Well, of *course* it would. That kind of roundabout way of saying it is still way too advanced for me, though.

"No, that's not what I mean, I'm being serious. It's certainly all well and good that you've been practicing every day.....but even so—"

That was as far as I got before stopping mid-sentence. Had I continued with

something like 'But even so, that won't be enough to cover the gap', there's no mistaking that I would have provoked his wrath yet again. Though, since I had more or less already said as much, it was probably too late anyway.

.....Or so I thought, but here an unexpected reply came.

"The thing about me practicing every day, who did you hear *that* from?"

The most overbearing way of speaking to date. Eh? *That* part?

"Uh, well." Since I had no need to hide it, I told him. "From Izumi."

".....Thought so." Nakamura furrowed his eyebrows. "Haven't you been getting along pretty well lately?"

"Eh?"

.....Wait a moment. Well, it might be too early to tell, but wait. I had suspected that the reason he had summoned me for a revenge match so prematurely was because I had angered him in some *other* way, but could it be that this guy.....?

"What's the big deal with you suddenly getting so close to Yuzu? Something's really off."

Just as I thought, *that's* what it was. But really, good job being able to say that so openly with all these people watching. Still, *seriously*, what do you take me for? You know, the whole reason I've been talking with Izumi a lot lately, is that she wants to be able to play against you, and she's been trying so hard with her AtaFami practice as a result. The fact that I've been helping Izumi work so hard [For *your* sake], doesn't that make me the cupid here?

Just *why* do I have to get caught up in a fight due to your jealousy over me getting along with Izumi?

"No, us getting along isn't—"

"Isn't *what*?"

Nevertheless, that didn't mean I was going to explain the real situation to him. Revealing to him the secrets of a girl giving their all in the name of love just to save my own skin would be awful. Inexperienced in love I may be, but that is something even I understand. Which means, I have no choice but to get

through this by my own power.

"Look, it's not like that, and even if it were, we shouldn't be fighting *here*, right? Better someplace like your house or mine."

"House.....? That reminds me.....you went to Yuzu's house, didn't you? Someone saw you. "

Oh *come* on, did I just make it even worse? Well that's no good. Of course that would make him angry. A kimo-ota who had beaten him up in a game and who kept on getting carried away with their words, was now getting closer to the girl he likes — well, still unconfirmed, but anyway, *that* girl — and finally, even stepped foot in her house. Not good at all. He's angry. This problem isn't one I have any chance of evading.

"Ahh—, umm, there's some circumstances to that....."

".....Which are?"

".....Uh, sorry, can't say....."

I couldn't even come up with a lie..... I don't know if me being unable to say it gave him an impression like[It's a secret between Izumi and me], but here Nakamura completely lost his cool, and with a "Whatever, let's start." tightly gripped his controller.

However, "But.....""What *now*?" "Uh.....""The way you're talking is seriously gross.", in that kind of fashion, I kept on buying time with use of my specialty grossness, holding out in the hope that the situation would somehow change. Hinami, I beseech thee. It should be a simple matter for that person to suspect something when I don't turn up at the second Sewing Room, gather information, and rush here. Actually, if I could just buy enough time, there's no doubting that she would come. That's the type of person she is.

As I kept up with the meaningless dialogue while supplicating as such, suddenly, with a bang, the door to the room was thrown open. Ye gods!

"Coming through—, wha, ehh!? Tomozaki!?"

This was probably what they call a '*LOL too bad*' situation. Now Izumi had turned up. Unbelievable.

"Yuzu, *really*? I thought I told you *don't come*."

"Ah, sorry, Shuuji, um, it's just I thought I was.....about ready to be.....your.....opponent....."

Perhaps sensing that something wasn't right with the atmosphere in the classroom, her voice quickly trailed off. Nakamura, I'm sorry. This is probably the worst possible situation for you. It's my fault for suggesting to Izumi that she might be able to take you on by the end of this week, as well as for pointlessly wasting time earlier. That's why it's really all my fault now. We really should have played right away. In this situation with Izumi watching, there's really no way you can withdraw. I wonder if there's any way for you to get her to leave.

"Well whatever, just watch, we're starting now."

"Eh.....!? O-Okay!"

Oh boy. Now you've done it. There's no going back now. Izumi blended in with the rest of the onlookers lined up at the back.

"Yuzu~ like I was saying, it's useless to try~, let's go back~"

The door was flung open once again, and along with her voice, now entering the room was none other than *the* Konno Erika from Izumi's rant, together with her followers. Brightly bleached hair and a short skirt. Even within that group, Konno Erika noticeably stood out.

"Oh? What's going on?" That was from one of the people within her group of followers. "I'm gonna have a match with Tomozaki, watch." That was from Nakamura. Ohhh boy. Now the Konno Army Corps are joining the crowd of spectators. Just *what* is going on? Attack Families with an all-star raijuu cast? Now why would he carry out such a suicidal act? I don't know anymore.....

"That's enough, Tomozaki. It's too late to run away now."

"Haah....." I resolved myself. I'll say it in advance, but the moment it becomes a matter of AtaFami, I become unable to hold back.".....The one who can't run away now is *you*, Nakamura."

In every possible way.

Translator Notes:

[1] Original is kind of a Japanese idiom, 雀の涙 (A sparrow's tear), used to convey just how tiny an amount is.

Part 3

At those bold, scathing words coming from a side of me only Nakamura has seen, the gallery erupts. "Hyuu!" "Well said!" "That *is* Tomozaki, right!?" "He's finally gotten fired up!". Noisy, noisy. Whatever. If you're going to leave me no choice but to do it, I'll do it. In accordance with the stage that you've so graciously prepared, I'm going to take this seriously. Go ahead and hate yourself for picking a fight with me in a matter concerning AtaFami. On the AtaFami stage, I'm the strongest character, you know. "As usual, you can really talk, huh? Tomozaki?". I can vaguely hear Nakamura complaining about something. He's clearly mad. As if I'd care. If you're going to hit me, then *hit* me. If doing that will end the matter, I don't care if you do it. But if you're going to play, then *play*. That is all.

"Enough of all that. Are you playing or are you not?"

Without looking in Nakamura's direction, I coldly spit out those words as I pick up my controller. Fine. Provided we start the match right away, I can just take a back seat and leave myself on autopilot. It's equivalent to stepping into a bucket upstream and letting the current carry me to the mouth of the river. No need for any superfluous logic here. Only using my conditioned senses and past experience should be more than sufficient to bring this event to its rightful conclusion. "Of *course* I'm playing. Hurry up and choose your character.". It was questionable as to whether or not I had actually heard those words before doing so, but I was already habitually selecting my usual character of choice. *Tch*. The explosive sound of a clicking tongue could be heard from somewhere nearby. Ah, 's *that* so. Nakamura then proceeded to choose *his* character. Foxy as usual, huh. Let's do this.

The instant the fight begins, I am already darting towards Nakamura. In response, Nakamura performs a light skip and fires off two long range shots. A technique which combines the landing animation of a small jump and long range attacks to eliminate any openings after firing. A delicate technique that the previous Nakamura could never have used. He sure has practiced. However, that won't be enough to stop my movement. No hesitation, no hurry, no

carelessness. I simply continue to make Found move in the appropriate way that I know. Time for some tricks.

Look, Nakamura. Whether or not you've been able to achieve something with your practice, I don't care, and it's irrelevant. To you, those things might be tremendously impressive. However, from my point of view, they might as well be worth nothing. To me, Nakamura is like an ant from that country somewhere in Africa which has grown wings and become able to fly. *Oh, is that so?* It's the same as that. The trick that Nakamura has set up in response to my charge, I'll crush it with technique and experience. Using Blink, I narrowly dodge the timings five consecutive times. **Gacha-cha-cha-cha-cha**. There's no way he can respond to these absurd movements he has never seen before. I grab hold of Nakamura, who is full of openings, and string together a combo until the instant death. First life.

"What just happened?" "Such gross movements." "Nai waa—" "Eh?". The gallery of spectators is bewildered. Too bad, but this set is going to end with another three repeats of what just happened. However, as one might expect, five rapid uses of Blink is more of a technique relying on the element of surprise so it won't work a second time. That's why it is clear that the next thing I should do is, naturally, different from the previous. *Pikaaa*, I could see my paths to victory shining. There's seven or eight ways to go about doing this, but which one should I choose? Well, I guess this one will do.

I perform an offensive dash, purposely delaying the timing a bit, and come to a halt at a point just past Nakamura's guard. Nakamura had stepped forward and attempted a grab, leaving himself completely exposed. Too bad for you. I've passed by you, so I'm now right *behind* you. Avoiding his throw, I reach over my shoulder and grab the defenseless Nakamura. Throw. Combo. Second life.

"Eh?" "You can't escape?" "Once you get caught it's the end?" "So cheap." "Nai wa.". It's actually possible to escape, you know. That is, if you're *good*. Getting more and more flustered, Nakamura's precision has been continuing to fall. With this, there are numerous paths I can take. **Pikapikapikaa**. It's dazzling. There's really too many of them. I guess I'll go straight this time. If I hesitate too much, my eyes will start to hurt. It's not like it matters which one I choose anyway. Regardless of my choice, Nakamura will get taken down in the end.

A jump followed by an offensive dash. He guards it, and I get grabbed."Ohhh!" "He's caught!". The crowd gets excited. This is the first time that one of Nakamura's attacks has made contact. Nakamura probably intends to execute a combo, but there's something he likely isn't aware of. It's certainly true that when up against a full health Found who is unable to alter their falling trajectory, Foxy can throw them and execute a combo. However, if the Found is able to slip away, then instead *Foxy* will be the one left wide open to combos. Well, I guess that without any practice partners who can do that to you, there's no way to realize this fact. It's your environment you should blame.

Booom, third life.

"....." "....." ".....". The gallery plunges into silence. Well of course. So far, I had taken his life twice by executing combos after a throw up until the instant death. However, just when the opposite finally happened and they were thinking to themselves '*Nakamura grabbed Tomozaki!*', Nakamura was instantly taken down mid-air. Now that that's taken care of, all that's left is to take out the trash. From here, it'll simply be like an assembly-line. In front of my very eyes there is already an expanse of connected, shining paths. Regardless of which direction I move in, I will arrive at my intended destination. As if taking flight, I kick the ground. My body floats, dancing towards space. Looking down, from the right edge of the expanse, an absurdly complicated line can be seen stretching out. Wherever I head, the point of arrival will be the same so I might as well get some practice. I'll try following *that* line, shall I.

I run towards Nakamura, and perform a Small jump. Mid-air backwards A. Blink to the right. Side A. Small jump. Mid-air up A. Land. Jump. B. Slightly charged mid-air shot. Land. Dash to the landing point and grab. Downwards throw. Jump. Mid-air forwards A. Mid-air forwards A. Mid-air jump. Down B. Landing. B charged. Jump. Mid-air jump. Down B. Up B. Landing. Small jump. B Shoot. Dash. Off the cliff. Mid-air forwards A. Mid-air jump. Down B.

Fourth life.

Game set.

Part 4

Haah. Now I've gone and done it. I had been seriously concentrating in order to overcome the high-pressure situation, but as a result, had beat him up a lot more than necessary.

".....Shit."

Nakamura clenched his teeth, whispering with a look of anguish on his face. Witnessing this, the gallery was at a complete loss for words. Understandably so. With a stock of four lives each, he had been defeated without being able to take a single life off me. There wasn't even a word for this kind of difference in ability.

Around the time I had been claiming the first win, there had been instigations like "He's way too good at this, *grooss*.", but perhaps due to how seriously Nakamura was taking the match, the gallery had quietened down by itself.

When I turned to look behind, with the exception of Konno Erika, not a single person was looking in our direction. Some of them were awkwardly looking at each other, some of them were putting on fake smiles, some of them were looking down at their feet. Look, I already said I'm sorry. But I really didn't have a choice, did I? I didn't even *want* to do this, you know!

Finding it extremely difficult to stick around in that atmosphere, with just a "Umm, well then, that's that.", I got up as if to leave. However, at that moment, an unexpected voice kept me from doing so.

".....Again."

The one who said those words was of course, none other than Nakamura.

—Just what is this guy saying? One more time? In spite of how the last round went? Come on, there's no point. It's impossible. You wouldn't even be able to win after a hundred attempts, and that's not an exaggeration. There's really no point in continuing.

"No, come on....."

"I told you, *again*. Hurry up and get ready."

".....Umm, should I change charac-"

"No, don't. I won't be changing either. It's not even like I'm trying to blame the characters. Don't be stupid."

".....Alright."

Nakamura didn't even take a single peek at the gallery of spectators, focusing only on the game's screen as he spoke.

As for those watching, they had a kind of astonished, perhaps even slightly fearful look on their faces as they stared at Nakamura from behind.

Reluctantly, I picked up my controller.

Since I wasn't in the same accelerated state of mind as in the first round, this time I took slightly more damage than before, but I won yet again without dropping a single life.

I mean, of course I would. Turning to look at the gallery, I spotted Hinami amongst the crowd of people lowering their gazes. Whoa. Most likely, she had stealthily entered at some point during our second round. She was quietly having a talk with Izumi, who was right next to her. Izumi was probably giving her a run-down of the situation.

However, this situation was surely too far gone for even *Hinami* to be able to salvage. It was no longer clear if it was myself or Nakamura who was the bad guy here, and as long as neither of us was convicted of anything, it didn't seem possible to come to a conclusion.

Having finished receiving an explanation from Izumi, Hinami now made an extremely difficult face, looked at me, then shook her head.

I couldn't accurately figure out what that gesture was supposed to mean, but the nuance was definitely negative. In other words, there was likely no way to greatly improve the situation from here.

"Again."

.....Unbelievable.

Despite the fact that in the midst of this gathering of pretty much *all* the prominent riajuu, male and female alike, you expressly declared your intention

to have revenge, yet ultimately lost two rounds in a row without taking a single life off me. Why hasn't your spirit broken yet? What are you even thinking? Why do you keep trying to fight?

"Hurry up."

He didn't seem to have any intention of asking for my consent.

".....Alright."

—Once again, I won without losing a single life.

The mood continued to get heavier and heavier. That was something even I could sense, so to all the more mood-sensitive riajuu, it was probably suffocating. Looking over my shoulder, I could see that with the exception of Konno Erika and Hinami, every person present was looking down in a way that under normal circumstances would be considered overdoing it. As for those actually looking our way, Hinami was expressionless, while Konno Erika had a stern look on her face.

".....I have prep school today, so....."

Saying this, one of Erika's followers tries to leave.

"Ah, me too....."

Following their lead, another person raises their voice.

"Stop making things up. I know you guys have prep school on Thursdays."

Without turning to look at them, but with a definitively overbearing tone of voice, Nakamura speaks bluntly.

"Ahh, I guess so."

"Ahaha—....."

And then.

"Again."

Come on, this can't be real. Why would you do this, Nakamura.

However, there's no way to persuade him otherwise.

".....Alright."

—Just like before, I win without a single death.

—However.

Again. Again. Again. This happened another three times. Each time, the mood would get heavier, but Nakamura's attitude did not change in the very least. Then, on the third time, rather than it being another flawless victory for me, I finally dropped a life. I say this in all honesty, but I had by no means been going easy on him.

Still, that should do it. With this, Nakamura should be satisfied. Most likely, his pride had been injured by the fact that after so many consecutive battles, forget winning a single *round*, he had been unable to make me drop a single *life*. That's why.....

"Nakamura, let's leave it at that....."

"Again."

Nakamura continued to face straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the game screen.

"Come on, that's enough."

"Do you really think I'll be satisfied knocking just one life off you? I thought I told you not to look down on me. *Again*, I said."

For the first time since the series had begun, Nakamura directed his gaze away from the screen, then looked right at me. I couldn't sense even a sliver of hesitation in those eyes. There was even fighting spirit dwelling within. It didn't seem like this was a simple case of good-for-nothing stubbornness.

".....Alri-"

"Shuuji~, don't you think it's about time you gave up? It's starting to get a bit *gross*."

I turned around in search of the owner of the voice. It was Konno Erika.

"Like, *really*? You're getting all serious when it's a *game*, you know~. That's soo stupid."

Nakamura turns around and gives Konno a piercing gaze.

".....This has nothing to do with you."

"*Haa?* Even though you went as far as stopping someone who was trying to leave, you're *seriously* saying this has nothing to do with me? I can't help but think there's something wrong with your head, grooss~"

Not caring a single bit about Nakamura's overpowering aura of intimidation, Konno smiled mockingly as she spoke.

"I don't recall ever stopping *you* from leaving, though? Why are you even following me around, Erika, it's *gross*."

The expression on Konno Erika's face warps.

"*Heeeh*. Now you're acting all high and mighty. What, are you getting carried away because I confessed to you the other day? That's seriously gross. Congrats on misunderstanding. You're just the one who stands out the most in our class, so I thought that if it worked, then lucky for me. If I had known you were this gross, there's no way I'd have confessed, no *wayyy*~"

Speaking carelessly, yet in a way that stabs at his heart.

"Heeeh. I couldn't care less about what you think. If I had to say, I'm simply not interested in you."

Seemingly annoyed, Konno Erika scratches her head with an index finger.

"Like, really, no matter how many times you try, you can't win. It's so pointless it's laughable. We can tell just by looking, but you're actually extremely weak, aren't you Shuuji?"

".....!"

For the first time, Nakamura hesitates. As if taking advantage of that opening,

"Isn't that right? Mika?"Konno Erika tries to get one of the girls in her group to agree. What a nasty choice of timing.

"Um, yeah, it's really gross. Actually, wouldn't it be normal to *want* us to go back?"

A truly mocking tone of voice.

"Righht?Is that all?"

Konno Erika spurs her on even further. That's such a bold way of going about it, oi.

"Um, no, uhh, I mean, you're being so uncool, Nakamura. It'd be better for you if you died, *seriously*."

"That's soo true~" says Konno Erika delightedly.

Then, using that as an opportunity, the others in Konno Erika's group began to join in on attacking Nakamura. As for Izumi, she was silent.

"Like, don't you remember? This guy, didn't he tell us to watch him get revenge? Isn't that *crazy*?"

"That's crazy, craaazy! A mess like *this* after that isn't normal! Actually, I'd rather he gave us back our time!"

"That's how it is, Shuuji. What you're doing is seriously gross, since you're weak. You've, L-O-S-T. Get it?"

The abuse from Konno Erika was *especially* sharp-edged.

"This has nothing to do with any of you. If you're not interested then leave, scram."

As one might expect, the emphasis that Nakamura placed on his words was weaker than before.

"Saying we're unrelated, hilarious! Actually, huh? Isn't Nakamura kind of teary-eyed!?"

"You're right! Eh, what's this! He's crying!? At *that* age!?"

"Ehhh!? Crying after losing in a game, how old are you!? You're not a pre-schooler anymore!

Actually, it seems like lately you've been coming here after school to practice, haven't you? Ahahaha, what an idiot. A loss like this in spite of that? All that effort was *compleetely* wasted, wasn't it? Ahh, soo embarrassing. It's such a stupid game."

Following up her blunt words with a '*Let's go.*', Konno turns to leave with the rest of her group. I was the only one who noticed, but on seeing this, Hinami

moved her lips ever so slightly.

—However, before she could say anything, the voice of a male *full* of anger echoed in the room.

"Wait, *what* did you just say?"

The look on Hinami's face which had been expressionless up until now, turned to one of complete surprise. The most surprised I had ever seen her. And understandably so.

After all, the one who had blurted out those words was neither Nakamura, nor any one of his followers, but *me*.

"Ha?"

Snapped at by a human being of low social status, Konno glared at me with an expression of extreme displeasure.

".....What's this? *Tomozaki*? What, are you unhappy about something? Heehh. Gross."

Brushing me aside with an uninterested tone of voice, as if she was dealing with small fry.

"Is '*gross*' the only thing you lot can say?"

Trying hard to produce a glare of my own, I spoke sharply.

"Ha? *Sure* we can! What's with that tone of voice, it's seriously putting me off!"

"Actually Tomozaki, aren't you getting full of yourself? That's so incredibly gross~!"

"Like, really? Why are you even covering for this guy? It seriously makes no sense."

"That's *soo* true! Actually, he's not even saying anything, hilarious~!"

"Don't they say that trash hangs out with trash? I seriously don't want to get involved with them!"

Charged with malice, each word pierced me, one after the other. They might have been flaring up at me like this, but my hands were shaking.

"Soo stupid. Well, I wouldn't expect the likes of you lot to understand, though."

"Ha?"

Practice for tone of voice. For facial expression. For posture. For speech pattern. Ever since I had begun all of that, I had come to know for the first time. In every one of those things, these people exist at a level vastly higher than my own. Day in and day out, their craft gets tempered. Where to an extent incomparable with someone like me, they can manipulate those things at will. I also knew that these people had long been aware that I stood on a lower level, and were looking down on me. Which is why my words, regardless of their contents, probably would not reach.

"You know," I slowly begin to speak. In most serious tone of voice that I can muster. "the people who lose a fight, but instead of making the effort to improve, blame their loss on the conditions or the characters, *they're* the type I hate the most."

"Ha?"

"So what?"

"What are you *talking* about?"

"SHUT UP!" I shout as loudly as I can.".....Last time, when I won against Nakamura, he made excuses. He blamed it on the character. I thought he was a person who would never lower his head. However, what about now? In front of *this* many people! Losing *this* badly! In spite of all that, fighting round after round, he hasn't made a single excuse! In the end, he even managed to make me *lose* a life! The likes of you probably don't understand how amazing that is! How *incredible* that is!"

Even I have things I cannot forgive.

And those *particular* words spoken by Konno Erika were ones I would *never* forgive, no matter what.

"Ha?"

"What's up with *that*?"

"Like, in the first place, isn't it meaningless if you don't win?"

"Nakamura! Is no longer! A person who makes excuses!"

I then took a deep breath, and shouted the following.

"HOWEVER, RIGHT NOW, I COULDN'T CARE LESS ABOUT ANY OF THAT!"

Unable to comprehend the reason for that seriousness, the whole group was at a loss for words.

And then, I lock eyes with Erika. She returns the glare. It might be scary, but there is absolutely no way I am going to look away.

This is my stubbornness.

"Konno. You said this earlier, right?[It's such a stupid game:]."

In this battle, both my level and equipment may be inadequate, and I may not even have any measures in place to make up for that. It is a battle where losing is apparent, but even so, it is a battle where I *will not* concede. These people probably do not know. That in RPGs, it is common to have Event Battles where even if your HP gauge reaches zero, you *will not* fall!

Well, as for whether or not that is the case *here*, even I don't know, though!!

"Understand? I *do* also hate those people who don't put in the effort and make excuses for their loss!However!"

That is why, with my sincere thoughts being[I just personally find it displeasing], I now shouted.

".....However! The people who make light of AtaFami! I hate them even *more!!*"

The group looks at me blankly, not saying a single word. This is a face-off between Konno and myself.

"Listen, this game is a *kamige*! It's well balanced. On top of being able to improve your ability as much as you like with enough practice, there are *no* cheap tricks, *no* single instant-death combos that you can rely on! The characters are overflowing with individuality and ideas, and each and every one of them is a character good enough to have the leading role in any other game!

Even so, the lesser known element, the single player element, it's full of features and matches the online one! Furthermore, the environment for online play is incredibly good, and you can carry out your battles with ease! Even the support system is great! And in addition to that! Due to the the killer techniques that aren't just any ordinary attacks, and the showy effects for the super killer techniques, even a casual gamer can have fun! In AtaFami, there is a balance between challenging features aimed at core gamers and popular features directed at the casual crowd! Those opposing elements are allowed to perfectly co-exist! It's a timeless masterpiece!!"

"Ha? Gross, is *that* what you wanted to tell-"

"But right now! Even that!! EVEN *THAT* I COULDN'T CARE LESS ABOUT!!"

I shouted to the point that I could feel my throat being torn to shreds. Even Konno Erika was taken aback now.

"You lot have *got* to be kidding me! What do you *mean*,[All that effort was *compleetely* wasted]! Stop messing around!! The likes of shitty bitches like you lot wouldn't understand! Nakamura has been trying hard! And it's not just *now*! These past few weeks!! He's been trying really, *really* hard!!"

Nakamura now gives me a surprised look.

"But / understand!! Listen, that move he did during the second life of the second round to escape my combo! *That* move! It's super, *super* difficult! It's not the kind of thing you can learn in a day! It only has a leeway of 10 frames!!
[1] Normally, it would take several months to learn to do it consistently!! And *actually* using it under conditions like these is even more difficult!! It's not something you can do by chance! Understand!? And that's not all! The move he did in the last round that made me drop a life! That's a combo so difficult, even I would find it a challenge to get it right every time! That was MLJ! Moonlight Jewel, an extremely difficult combo!! Nakamura is!! Amazing! Listen up!! Dig out all that dirt blocking your ears and listen well!! Not that any of you would understand! Nakamura has! With a goal in mind! Steadily! Every day! Without fail! Even if he got tired of it, continued and continued and continued to work towards it, and even though it might be a very small thing, managed this reality!! His effort led to results!!"

I was practically screaming.

"That's why, don't laugh at Nakamura!! Don't laugh at a person's efforts!! A person who is seriously trying their best!! Is unconditionally!! More than anything else!! Beautiful, and just!!"

And then, even with my vision blurring to the point where I no longer knew if I was whiting out or blacking out,

"Look!! I hate people who make excuses and don't put in the effort even though they've lost! I also hate those who make fun of AtaFami! However!! More than that! More than *anything* else!

With all my might, I shouted.

"PEOPLE LIKE YOU WHO DON'T PUT IN ANY EFFORT, BUT LAUGH AT THOSE WHO DO, ARE BY FAAAAR! THE TYPE I HATE THE MOST!!"

Translator Notes:

[1] So he basically had to press a button within the right 10 frame interval to be able to escape. Since we know AtaFami runs at 60 FPS, that's about 0.167 seconds.

Part 5

Silence. Konno Erika didn't say a word. Her group of followers simply waited to see how she would respond. Nakamura was staring at me, his surprised expression frozen in place. His followers shuffled around uncomfortably. As for Hinami, her eyes were slightly moist. Oioi, are you serious? As expected of an actor. She's amazing.

The first person to make a move in this situation was Konno Erika.

".....Gross, what is he saying?"

With that command acting as a signal, her group of followers came back to life.

"It really is gross."

"Why so serious? It's just a game."

"*Really* gross."

Ahh, it's no good. I see, so *this* is the[mood]. Now, due to Konno Erika's words,[Getting serious and talking about something]has been established as something negative. I understood this from experience.

This is as far as I can go. I've run out of bullets. I'll be leaving the rest to you, Hinami. I can only do so much.

You should be able to handle it better.

Hinami and I exchanged looks. She laughed softly and nodded. Then, facing forwards, she opened her mouth.

"Ehh—, I don't think it's bad to be serious about these types of things."

And so a cheerful, amiable voice resounded in the room.

—No. A cheerful, amiable, but slightly frightened voice.

Wait. A *frightened* voice?

".....Ha? Yuzu? What do you mean?"

Konno Erika's eyes turn to face Izumi. Eh!? *I-Izumi!?*

Shifting my gaze to the person standing next to Izumi, I found Hinami still there her mouth still wide open, having lost her opportunity to speak.

"N-no, like, how should I say this? Look, don't you think it's a bit like *that*? You know, that feeling of youth that boys have, or something....."

"Heeh? Does this mean that instead of siding with me you're siding with *Tomozaki*?"

Izumi's shoulders jumped visibly.

"I-It's not like that! Or rather, you know, recently, I've also started trying out, what's it's called, AtaFami? It's actually a very deep game! Erika, you should try it out too! Come on!"

"Ha? What? Are you changing the subject?"

"I.....I'm not changing anythinng~! I mean look, the subject was AtaFami right? Right? I mean really, that small jump thing is a lot harder than it seems! It's difficult to get right even you're trying! Ah, though I *have* gotten a bit better at it recently—"

".....Haaa?"

Painfully going nowhere. We're talking about Izumi, the mood reader. There was no way that she hadn't realized this herself.

"Also—! The powerful skills come out slow, see—, and it's pretty difficult to make them hit! Ah, but I found out something! They work if you use them right after a skill that comes out faster! I think that's called a combo!?Wait, of course it is! Ahaha—....."

Which meant that even though it hurt, she was enduring. Pressing forward through sheer willpower. However, looking just at her outward appearance, it was clear that she wasn't faring well. Due to the feeling of discomfort Izumi emitted along with her inexplicable desperation and single-mindedness, the situation was getting all jumbled up. The focus was becoming more and more unclear.

"Anyway! That's why I think it's actually difficult to use Found well! Ahhhh, it looks like I still have a lonng way to go~. Oh, but I think Foxy is even more

difficult, since the falls are so fast! It's so easy to fall off the stage by accident, you know—. AtaFami really is difficult. But I'm trying to improve! The reason is a secret though... just kidding! Ahaha....."

Everyone present in their room had their gaze fixed on Izumi. For someone like Izumi, someone who cared about other people's opinions of her, it had to be a fairly harsh situation.

"The other characters too, for example....."

Hinami tried to take a single step forward, clearly unable to remain on the sidelines any longer. However, before she was able to accomplish this, Konno Erika placed her hand on Izumi's shoulder.

"Izumi, that's enough. It's gotten kinda boring." She then turned to her followers. "Guys, let's go."

With the exception of Izumi, the Konno Army Corps left the room. Taking advantage of the timing, Nakamura's group quickly followed suit.

The door slammed shut and was followed by a moment of silence. Then in the next moment, Izumi sank down to her knees.

".....I was so scared.....!"

Then, sniffing, she began to cry. *Seriously?*

Nakamura walked towards her.

"Idiot, what were you forcing yourself for. You're not even that type of person."

"But.....but.....!"

Nakamura placed his hands on Izumi's shoulders. Hey. Don't touch my disciple. Ah, but it seems like these two like each other so maybe it's fine. I suppose I don't really mind it.

"It's okay, don't say anything. You've worked hard."

"Uuu.....! Shuuji~~~~!"

"Come on, it's okay. You don't want to show a face like this to everyone, do you?"

Nakamura held out a hand to Izumi.

"I-it's okay, I'm fine.....!"

Saying that, Izumi vigorously wiped away her tears using her sleeves and, after remaking a crisp facial expression, got up on her own feet. The two of them then left the room side-by-side.....well, just before that, Nakamura glanced at me sharply. He then whispered something so quietly the echoes never left his mouth. Words which should not have travelled further than his immediate vicinity, I somehow heard crystal clear. And the determination that dwelled inside them was, as far as I could tell, the real deal.

"I'll win next time."

Then, with Izumi by his side, he left the room.

Uhhhh—...?

".....The hell was that?"

".....As if I would know."

In a manner atypical for her, Hinami just stood there with a blank, defenseless expression.

Then, as I looked at that face while vacantly reflecting on the event that had just transpired, I realized something.

"Ahh, that reminds me."

".....What?"

"This time."

I consciously employed the same cynical tone that Hinami would often use.

"This time, you didn't do a thing."

For the first time since meeting Hinami, I witnessed a look of pure shock on her face.

Chapter 7: Please let there be an extra story after the credits

Saturday, three days after the incident.

I was now with Hinami at a certain Italian restaurant in Kitayono, in the process of eating the world's most delicious salad.

"This is way too delicious....."

"Fufu. I know, right?"

Forget the pizza and the pasta, I was done in by the starter salad. What a surprise attack. That was sly. Way too sly. I'm happy though.

While enjoying the perfect harmony between the vegetables' natural sweetness and salad dressing, we began a familiar kind of meeting. To tell the truth, I would have liked us to have held the discussion sooner, but for a while Hinami had been preoccupied with bringing things under control. As a result, up until today we hadn't had a proper chance to go over what had happened.

"Still, that ended up being pretty messy, huh....."

For the act that had played at the former Principal's Office, due to the number of eyewitnesses and loudness of what had happened, even the tiniest details had made their way to the ears of a great number of people. The way in which Nakamura had suffered consecutive defeats, my words of provocation, my gross playstyle, my loud and serious rant, my..... wait, huh? Looks like they're all negative things about *me*. Ha ha ha.

As for the influence the incident had on the power relationships within our classroom..... surprisingly, it didn't end up changing very much.

Nakamura still reigned at the top of the hierarchy, and there was no apparent strife between the Nakamura group and Konno Erika group. As one might expect, the frequency of interaction between members of the two factions had dropped, but on Friday, I saw Izumi acting as an intermediary for a slightly awkward conversation between Nakamura and Konno. Those guys are way too

good at mending relationships. Perhaps they had been adopting a wait-and-see attitude before patching things up.

If I had to say what it was among those things that had changed drastically — they were two in number.

The first was with regards to Izumi. Almost everyone in our class had guessed that Izumi had been practicing AtaFami to get Nakamura to pay more attention to her, and the *mood* was to warmly watch over her. It was likely that the only person to have *not* realized Izumi's feelings was Nakamura himself.

This theme had settled in our class such that a mention of the word [Thick-headed] would result in a finger being pointed at Nakamura. However, even *this* was something Nakamura himself had yet to notice, making it a somewhat comical situation. He's probably too engrossed in AtaFami to realize. Really, with that kind of never-give-up attitude, he might be well-suited to being a gamer.

The second change was in Nakamura himself. Ever since the incident, perhaps due to the frustration from losing to me, his passion for AtaFami was now stronger than ever. Well, it would have been fine if that was all there was to it, but it now felt like he had become all '*I don't have time for things like love!*'. Be it the short breaks or even the lunch break, he seemed to be using them to practice AtaFami like a demon.

In other words, because of me, who *should* have played the role of cupid, Nakamura's focus was more on AtaFami than on Izumi more than ever. Nakamura, you had probably paid quite a bit of attention to Izumi up to that point. Umm, sorry. It looks like my meddling ended up having the opposite effect.

"Well, regardless, it's good that you weren't too negatively affected in the end."

".....That's also true."

That's right. The effect on me had also been smaller than expected.

The incident had taken place on Wednesday, so I had experienced the following for the duration of two days. Classmates would occasionally approach

me about the incident, but the majority of them possessed intentions that were neither malicious nor friendly, but instead those of straightforward inquisitiveness. I would truthfully answer the questions thrown at me, after which with a 'Heeeh!' they would leave satisfied. My number of enemies hadn't increased as a result of that incident. Neither had my number of friends, though.

—It was likely that the only reason Nakamura and I had suffered relatively low damage was due to Hinami's work behind the scenes.

With just the words "There's a few things I need to do", without giving me the specifics, for those two days Hinami had excused herself from our after school meetings. However, during that period I witnessed Hinami's public relations activities at work several times. The one that left the biggest impression was the one where in the middle of our class, she said something to the effect of "Heeeh! If Juuji of all people is that into AtaFami, that must really mean it's an interesting game!" in a bright tone of voice. Stealth marketing at its finest. She was stealthily manipulating everyone's impressions of Nakamura and of AtaFami.

It was likely that she had also been covering for me in the same way. Well..... I'm thankful for that.

Also, although I'm not sure if this was something she had been saying all along or had now started saying since that incident with me had already happened, I even witnessed her spiritedly say "Onitada!" once in front of all our classmates. She really likes saying that.

"Anyway, now for my report....."

"Aside from the incident.....so it's about what's going on with Fuuka-chan, right."

"Yeah. I'm not sure how to put this, but a few things happened."

I told her about how I had confessed the truth to Kikuchi-san, and how I had ended up not inviting her to see the movie.

Hinami sighed in exasperation.

"Come on, you. Do you really mean to say that despite how well things

between the two of you were coming along, you let a chance like that escape? Look, do you really have the motivation to do this?"

"Nah, I've got motivation, plenty of it in fact."

".....Fine then. There's no point in chattering about past events. Let's think about how to proceed from this situation."

Saying this, Hinami sunk into thought.

".....That's true."

Even as I replied, I couldn't help but be impressed yet again.

As always, this part of her was amazing. Up until now, for whatever reason it had become routine for me to describe her as[amazing], but I hadn't seen what it was that *made* her amazing.

However, the reality of that is simple. It's because she's trying so hard to be that way. Recognizing where she currently stands, and putting in the effort that is needed. She is proceeding one step at a time, steadily, by her own volition.

That is why she's amazing.

Ever since accidentally hearing that recording of hers on the IC Recorder, my feelings regarding Hinami had been ones of amazement, or perhaps respect. At any rate, I harbored an emotion that resembled those things.

And so, with this in mind, I once again carried out an action that hadn't been prescribed by Hinami.

"Look, Hinami.....by the way, this is just some idle talk, but....."

"What is it?"

Hinami became slightly on-guard.

I put a hand in my pocket. Then, as deliberately as I could, I said the following.

"I've got these tickets for tomorrow's preview screening of Mary Jone, you see. Want to go see it together?"

For a moment, Hinami was taken aback. Then, she laughed mischievously.

Then, in the same deliberate manner as me, she gave me the following reply.

"—Ahh, I'm sorry. I've got plans for tomorrow, you see. I can't go."

Hahaha, is that so. I laughed as cheerfully as I could. Then a feeling of depression sank in. No good, huh.

"*However.....*"

".....Hm?"

In a gentle tone of voice, like a parent watching over a naughty child, but while at the same time showing me a somewhat impish smile, Hinami continued to speak.

"I'll be free after this, so why don't we go see a different movie afterwards?"

For a moment, I blanked out.

After which for some unknown reason, I found myself assailed by a sense of excitement, resembling an intense feeling of exaltation, or a feeling of accomplishment. However, I did not believe it likely to be a feeling of delight coming from a sentiment like[I've gotten to know a riajuu]or even[I'm going out somewhere with a girl].

It was nothing but a simple, uncomplicated feeling of[In real life, through my own hard work, I have produced a result that I myself wanted.]. That kind of actual feeling; a primitive, uplifting feeling. While it wasn't very definite, that is the type of suspicion I had.

".....Onitada!"

When I tried saying this as an experiment, Hinami pointed out that my usage was slightly incorrect. I see, I'll have to take this kind of thing step by step as well.

After all, isn't that how Life works? Since that's the case, I'm going to show you what I can do.

I might be a novice when it comes to this game, but I'm going to try playing it thoroughly from now on.

—End. Japan's number one niwaka gamer, the jaku-chara nanashi.



Afterword

Pleased to meet you. This is the writer who managed to make their debut following their undeserved receipt of the Award for Excellence in the 10th Shogakukan Light Novel Awards. My name is Yaku Yuuki.

This time round, it was decided that this light novel would receive publication through Gagaga Bunko. Naturally, this was achieved not through the efforts of myself alone, but as a result of collaborating with a number of different people to make such a thing a reality. Therefore, at the very least, for this long, superfluous[Afterword], I would like to openly commit my honest thoughts to paper.

Well I may say that, but I am not particularly good at talking about myself, nor at giving a commentary on the contents or theme of my work. Such a commentary would leave less room for interpretation, serving to influence the reader's thoughts about a work that has already left the hands of the author. Therefore, on this occasion I would like to talk about the emotions I felt when I saw the cover illustration of this volume for the first time.

At the time of receiving it from my editor-in-charge, what first astonished me was that level of cuteness. It was a composition overflowing with fetishes; that smiling facial expression, the light feel of the hair, the arrangement of the school bag and blazer, to mention but a few. I beheld the magnificence of a number of various points, but what moved me the most was those thighs. (Believing that I will eventually get a chance to speak about them in the future, I shall omit the other points for now)

If I had to say what it was about those thighs that moved me so much, the answer is simple. The part on the right side, near the root of Hinami-san's left leg. Since I've said this much, half of you will probably already be saying "I know, right" while nodding, but it's exactly as you've guessed: that bulge.

I do not know whether it should be called flesh or called an outpour of youth, but looking at that swelling around the base of that thigh, my heart was moved.

I then regained my composure, and, starting from the knee of that leg, traced the line along the thigh. Then, I *realized* something. Around the starting point,

this leg had an indentation, an expression of supple slenderness. However, for the root of that thigh from there, as soon as you pass the area where the hands of Hinami-san make contact with the ground, you reach the section where the line bulges out.

My mind was struck by lightning.

Intuition told me that these few millimetres of ingenuity were packed with strong feelings. It may have been my own convenient interpretation, but that is the conviction I held.

There was a reason for such conviction. It is because it is possible to depict thighs even using stick figures. Since you may not understand what I mean, I will provide a bit more detail. If you were use lines to draw a head, torso, hands and legs, making a bend around the center of the feet to form the knees, then above those knees will be the thighs. If one was to insist that those were thighs, then nobody would complain. At the very least, I wouldn't.

Basically, should one simply want to express the concept of[Thighs], then this would suffice.

And if one were to work on one of those just a little more, creating an enclosure by adding a straight line and then painting its inside the colour of flesh, then that would more than qualify as a thigh.

However, for the cover of this volume, the illustrator was Fly-san. To that, she added curves, and even exquisite ruggedness. As for what resulted from this contrivance, it was, in summary, to give a sense of realism to the drawing, to blow fetishism into it — no, perhaps a such a messy explanation might not be appropriate. Basically, this contrivance was simply carried out to give Hinami-san the warmth of a living being. It was a fingertip's worth of a few millimetres of magic.

Those in possession of the paperback version, please try softly touching that thigh on the front cover with a finger. Those reading the digital edition, please change the view to the cover illustration and place a finger against that thigh on the screen. I recommend using the index finger. How is it? Can you feel it? Is there not a definite sense of temperature, a sense of Hinami-san's warmth?

At the very least, I feel it. Right now, I am touching that thigh displayed on my

computer screen while using just my left hand to type on the keyboard, and at the tip of my right index finger, I can feel it. It is slightly different from the physical warmth felt when touching a real human being. It *is* different. I will admit that fact. However, at the tip of that finger, very faintly, even though it might seem like a lie, the genuine warmth of a living being draws breath.

I would be happy if I managed to convey these feelings to everyone.

Now for some thanks.

First, to every person involved in the selection of winners for the 10th Shogakukan Light Novel awards, and to every person involved in the making of this book, from editing and publishing to business and sales. Thank you.

Next, to my editor-in-charge Iwaasa-san from whom I received all sorts of advice, severe and sincere. To my roommate T-kun, who read my manuscript prior to submission for the Rookie of the Year award, and who helped with the revised version by giving me their honest impressions. To my illustrator Fly-san, who produced such astonishingly cute and attractive illustrations for a still-nameless author such as myself. I sincerely thank you.

Finally, to every reader who has picked up this book.

Thank you very much.

If you so please, I would be happy if you could accompany me for a next time.